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Losing Touch? Reaching for a Theology of Touch for a Digital Age

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LOSING TOUCH?

REACHING FOR A THEOLOGY OF TOUCH FOR A DIGITAL AGE

<u>Abstract</u>

Within a theological framework, this thesis asks to what extent human touch is fungible. Advances in haptic technology open the possibility of replicating, synthesising, and mediating aspects of touch, including sexual stimulation, through mechanical or digital transmission. Is there a substantive theological difference between being touched by some*one* and being touched by some*thing*?

After an introductory chapter, chapter two reviews the philosophy of touch in the Western tradition, and its place among the senses. An analysis of touch in the work of twentieth century phenomenologists, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, suggests that human touch is an event at which meaning is created and recognised, creating what he calls a "dehiscence".

Chapter three examines the theological anthropology of Rowan Williams, and his understanding that humans recognise their personhood in the desire of others and of God. Chapter four suggests that this might be extended from reciprocal gaze to touch, and begins to explore what this might mean if applied to interactions between a person and a machine.

Chapter five explores the quasi-sacramental qualities of touch, and its role in opening possibilities of grace, while chapter six offers an overview of the theological and cultural understandings of touch in the Biblical texts.

Chapter seven explores the ways in which touch that is mediated by a machine such as a computer is like or unlike plain human touch, and chapter eight sets out some of the ways in which the nature of touch might change when it is digitised, mediated or commodified.

The concluding chapter suggests that a theology of touch for a digital world belongs in an eschatological context. Machine touch is analogous to human touch, but the latter cannot be wholly replicated or objectified without loss of meaning. Our experience of touch is rooted in space and time, but its ultimate meaning lies beyond both.

LOSING TOUCH?

REACHING FOR A THEOLOGY OF TOUCH FOR A DIGITAL AGE

by

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DECLARATION

This work has been submitted to Durham University in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is my own work, and no part of it has been previously submitted to Durham or any other university for a degree.

for Jane

FOREWORD

> 'Going to the Feelies this evening, Henry?' enquired the Assistant Predestinator. 'I hear the new one at the Alhambra is first-rate. There's a love scene on a bearskin rug; they say it's marvellous. Every hair of the bear reproduced. The most amazing tactual effects.'[1]
>
> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

When I worked as a television producer we counted everything: the money spent on each aspect of the production, the hours of staff time deployed, and above all, the number of viewers who watched each minute of the programme. I was always puzzled by the fact that in spite of this obsession with measurement, we rarely made any attempt to assess the impact that our programmes had on the people who watched them. Whilst my colleagues studied the data to work out how to attract and keep audiences, I found myself in company with Marshall McLuhan calculating an 'inventory of effects'[2] of mass media, or with Neil Postman wondering whether I was colluding with the audience in 'amusing ourselves to death'.[3]

My TV career lasted not much more than a decade. Nevertheless, it coincided with the crossing of the Rubicon between analogue and digital recording and transmission. By the time I was able to seriously reflect on the medium to which I had contributed, I was aware that the internet, and digital culture in all its forms, were going to have a far greater, more penetrating influence than even television had. I found myself wondering at the transformational impact that digital media were likely to have on

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[1] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), 27.

[2] Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin Books, 1967).

[3] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (London: Methuen, 1985).

society. As one who, like Marshall McLuhan, took my Christian faith and heritage seriously, I felt both excited and fearful at what was to come. Some of my earliest theological studies were in the theology of marriage and family, so I was particularly interested in the impact that digital culture would have on human relationships. I wondered whether digital technology might challenge the ways that society construes what it is to be human at all.

In the background, conversations were being held amongst technologists and philosophers about the development of artificial intelligence (AI): the creation of machines that could imitate and potentially exceed the processing power of the human brain. One of the key goals in the development of AI has always been the imitation or representation of human forms and processes by computers. Might it be possible to create a machine that could process language as well as, or even better than, a human brain? If we could do this, could we programme it to imitate a human voice, or in some form to have the appearance of a human body? If we could do that, there would be obvious economic and political implications, but there would also be huge uncertainties. How could we distinguish what was authentic and what was fake: what had been generated by a flesh and blood human, and what had been generated by a computer? And what if we couldn't be certain which was which? What then would be the ethical and theological implications?

One particular aspect of this issue caught my eye. Whilst the replication of human speech and the generation of artificial images were the subject of a fair bit of public discussion, another area of the discipline was moving forward with less analysis or commentary: haptic technology, the synthesising of human touch by complex machines. Most of the effort in the development of haptics was concentrated on medical, military and industrial applications, but I was sure that it would only be a matter of time before haptic applications started to impinge on everyday life, either

overtly or unseen. Perhaps Aldous Huxley's vision of an evening at 'the feelies' was not that far off.[4]

As Huxley was aware, the idea of touch sensations generated by a computer can produce a visceral reaction. We instinctively don't like to feel things when we don't know what they are, or what has generated them. This, and my instinct that human touch has uniquely generative qualities, led me to my initial assumption that human touch is sacred and that anything that masquerades as human touch ought to be resisted, or at least clearly labelled as such. But on reflection, and as I have progressed with this research, the cultural, moral and theological issues involved in human interaction with digitally synthesised touch have become more complex and nuanced. Where had I got the idea that human touch is somehow sacred? And would it stand up to scrutiny?

In order to understand this, I have found myself wanting to explore what touch *is*, and what it contributes to my understanding of personhood and community. I have needed to explore the role of touch in encountering the world, in conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenologists who preceded him. I have chosen to think through what touch means from a theological perspective, in conversation with Rowan Williams, and with the Biblical texts. I have needed to explore the nature of analogy, to understand what we might mean when we say that a digital representation of touch (or anything else) is 'like' its physical counterpart. And I have tried to bring these diverse strands together to delineate some of the ethical, political and cultural issues that might arise with the advent of digitally synthesised touch. I have wanted to test whether there are aspects of plain human touch that are irreducible, and not replicable. I will set out this proposal more fully in the section 'Is touch fungible?' below.

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[4] Laura Frost, 'Huxley's Feelies: Engineered Pleasure in Brave New World', in Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and its Discontents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 130–161.

Every theological exploration, no matter how novel, has its starting points: presuppositions and priorities that shape the nature as well as the content of the conversation. This essay is no exception, so it is as well that I should set out some of my most fundamental assumptions before we begin. There will be enough presumptions and prejudices of which I am unaware, without taking for granted the ones of which I am. So here are some of the foundational beliefs that I own, upon which the remainder of this work will rest.

The first is that the world is pregnant with meaning. I do not believe that the existence of the universe is arbitrary, or that physics alone can give a sufficient account of it. That will be important, as I intend to explore the significance of one quite particular aspect of existence — the sense of touch. It wouldn't make sense to think about the significance of touch if nothing has significance at all. For many, including myself, the significance of anything derives from some form of intentionality which is associated with God. What particular form that takes is of course open to debate, but the idea that the world has meaning is part of the scaffolding that I am relying upon.

As a result, I believe that matter matters. I want to acknowledge from the start that this presupposition has significant implications. Probably the most important of these, for current purposes, is that all of the world's business, including touch and every other instance and kind of experience, takes place in space and time. History and geography are compulsory subjects on the timetable. They are of course, to some extent at least, human constructs. History goes forwards and backwards from where I am now, and geography goes north, south, east and west from here. It is a presupposition, perhaps even a matter of faith, to suggest that these directions are not meaningless.

My second foundational belief is closely allied to this. It is that persons matter. I won't go into detail just yet as to why or how they matter. Some of that will come later. But the fact that human beings are significant is a given for me. I hope it is for you too, since it is the only thing that I can be sure that you and I have in common.

The biggest clue as to why and how I believe persons matter is precisely the fact that I am able to share these thoughts with you through the medium of language. I am using language here in a very broad sense, meaning not just words on a page, or speech. In due course I will want to emphasise that touch belongs alongside words as one of the many modes of language that humans use, wittingly or unwittingly. For now, I simply want to note that it is our use of language to communicate that indicates most clearly that you and I both have significance.

The fact that I am writing, and you are reading, is one of the primary indicators that I am separate from you. But it also illustrates my third assumption, which is that persons, in all of their significance, are set in communities. That means that it is not only persons that matter, but what happens *between* us matters too. At Sunday School I was taught a song that went 'The church is not a building: the church is people'. The song was right in its implication that people matter in their embodied states, and not just as ideas. Only bodies can use language. But I have come to believe that in another respect my Sunday School song doesn't go far enough. The church is not a building, but it is not just people either. Church is what happens in the spaces *between* people, and it is the direction in which those people are travelling. What is true of the church in that context is true of the wider community of humans too. The sharing of language constitutes purposeful communities, and broadly speaking, language is only shareable between embodied human people.

That is not to say that what passes between people is the *only* thing that matters. In addition to being set in communities of other persons, we are set in a wider context in which we relate to other aspects of creation, animal, vegetable and mineral. What happens between human persons and other creatures matters too, and so does the way we treat the planet as a whole. But I start with an assumption that there are some qualities that are distinctive about human beings that mark us out from other facets of creation. One of the foundational beliefs I want to own here is that human persons owe a distinctive moral duty to each other. We also share a responsibility for working out the appropriate moral duty that we owe to other parts of creation, whether or not they have a shared language with which to call out to us.

The fourth foundational assumption that I am bringing to this exploration is perhaps the most scandalous. It is that the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are definitive events in human history. In the context of world faiths and beliefs it is more difficult to justify that assertion objectively. On one level it stems from the assumption that space and time, history and geography are significant, an assumption that many people of other faiths and beliefs might share. But on another level it must stem from my own unique perspective and experience. I own this, more than I can justify it.

All of these assumptions have a bearing on what follows, which is a consideration of the changing meaning and significance of the sense of touch in a world that is increasingly dominated by intangible modes of communication. Touch is a material experience.[5] It is personal, in that it has a particular range of meanings and significance for human beings. It is an activity that is set in communities who share and negotiate those meanings.

It cannot but be relevant that I am starting from the extraordinary assumption that God has touched the earth. It is perhaps a matter of faith to say that *that* particular slice of history, which happened in *that* particular place, can give meaning to the rest. If so, then I can only plead that a matter of faith that is owned has a greater integrity than a matter of faith that is neither owned nor examined. We all start from somewhere, and at least you now know where I am starting from.

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[5] In the course of this thesis I will consider touch in a number of different forms and circumstances. I want to distinguish between what happens when a person touches (or is touched by) another person, and what happens when a person touches (or is touched by) a non-human other, such as a machine or a non-human creature. I will try to make it clear what form of touch I am describing. To help with this, I will use the phrase 'plain touch' to indicate the conscious cutaneous touch of one human by another.

CHAPTER ONE

APPROACHES TO TOUCH

> Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth.[6]
>
> Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

What do we mean by touch?

<u>1   Remote touch</u>

In recent years a new range of haptic sex toys known as teledildonics has been developed. The word teledildonics (or sometimes cyberdildonics) was coined in 1975 by the philosopher and internet pioneer Ted Nelson, who also coined the word hypertext.[7] It refers to a branch of haptic technology that enables two or more people to engage in sexual interaction mediated by computers. A typical teledildonic set consists of two pieces of equipment, roughly shaped like male and female genitalia. These devices can be connected to a computer (or linked wirelessly) so that the users can transmit haptic sensations over the internet as easily as making a conventional phone call. Link them with sound and pictures on the screen and two people can stimulate each other sexually, even though they are apart. A student can have something like sex with their girlfriend or boyfriend, even if they are at the other end of the country. Prisoners, or soldiers on active service, can have sex across the distance. It is also possible to programme the devices to provide stimulation when the other person is offline. Digital sex toys have swept away the need for two people to be in the same place to have a sexual encounter. The devices are fairly crude at the

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[6] Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (London: Virago, 2019), 311.

[7] Ted Nelson, *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* ([n.p.]: Self-published, 1975), repr. as *Computer Lib*, 2nd edn (Redmond, Washington: Tempus Books and Microsoft Press, 1987).

moment — in both senses of the word — but as the technology advances, we can expect that the sensations they transmit will become more and more lifelike.

The first patent for a teledildonic device was filed by David Rothschild in 1993. In a way that is typical of internet start-ups, early hype has out-run reality, but a handful of teledildonic devices have become established in the market. Those currently available include *Onyx and Pearl*, produced by Kiiroo,[8] and *Max and Nora* produced by Hytto Ltd.,[9] either of which is commercially available as a set for under £300.

It is also possible to couple teledildonic equipment with a virtual reality headset such as Samsung's *Gear VR*[10] (retailing at around £60), or the more sophisticated Oculus *Rift*[11] (approximately £499), which adds three-dimensional images to the haptic effect, producing a highly immersive quasi-sexual experience.

Teledildonic devices are a specific instance of virtual or cybersex. These terms describe a broad range of "erotic or sexual pleasure experienced through cybernetic, digital and computer-based technologies and communication".[12] Typically, the effectiveness of cybersex depends on the ability to evoke visceral images in the imagination of the participants through the digital mediation of images, words or audio content. The term can cover a broad range of instances, from 'sexting' (the exchange of intimate messages or images by SMS) to explicit video content. Teledildonic equipment is a relatively crude example, and it may or may not make a significant impact on the market, but I regard it as salient because it is amongst the

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[8] <www.kiiroo.com/product/onyx-pearl-couple/?currency=USD>

[9] <http://www.lovense.com/>

[10] <www.samsung.com/uk/consumer/mobile-devices/wearables/gear/SM-R322NZWABTU>

[11] <www3.oculus.com/en-us/rift>

[12] Richard Glyn Jones, *Cybersex* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996), xv.

first commercially available equipment to offer haptic as well as visual and aural transmission.

It is undoubtedly true, as David Levy indicates in *Love and Sex with Robots*,[13] that these devices take their place in a long line of mechanical and electrical devices used by women and men for sexual stimulation throughout the ages. It may or may not be true, as 'futurologist' Ian Pearson suggests, that "by 2030 most people will have some form of virtual sex as casually as they browse porn today" and that "by 2035 the majority of people will own sex toys that interact with virtual reality sex".[14] If so, then the digital mediation of haptic sexual experience represents a significant cultural shift in that it uncouples the experience of intimacy from the parameters of time and space in which it is normally bound. As a boundary case, teledildonics invites us to reflect on the developing cultural and theological meanings of digitally mediated sexual experiences.

Internet-enabled sex toys can break the bounds of time as well as space. Once you have got used to the idea of having sex (or something like it) using a machine, the possibilities are endless. If you don't have a partner to have sex with, perhaps you could download a sexual experience from the web. You could customise your sex partner, or buy a pre-programmed interactive package of sex with your favourite film star. You could use the best and worst of your imagination to create virtual sexual partners, real or imagined, human or otherwise. You could record and repeat your most satisfying sexual experiences. You could simulate sex with multiple partners at the same time. You could even store up sexual experiences that you have enjoyed with your partner during life, and relive them after their death.

'Sextech', the application of mechanical and computerised devices to sexual stimulation, is just one example of haptic technology, that is, the synthesising of touch

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[13] David Levy, *Love and Sex with Robots* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2008), 220 ff.

[14] Ian Pearson, 'The Future of Sex Report: The Rise of the Robosexuals' *Bondara* (2015) <http://graphics.bondara.com/Future_sex_report.pdf> [accessed 28 October 2016].

by complex machines to enable digital intermediation between two persons, or between a person and an object. Haptic technology already has extensive military, industrial and medical applications, from bomb disposal, to automotive controls and robotic surgery. It is making its way into mainstream culture via gaming and personal computing. Where COVID-19 lockdown protocols made plain touch less accessible, haptic technology is taking the possibilities of touch to another level.

Throughout history, human beings have made tools as extensions of themselves, to do what they want to do, and do it better than human bodies can manage. So a crane can lift an object heavier than a person could, and lift it higher; an electron microscope can look at an object and reveal levels of detail far greater than the naked human eye could see; a computer can make calculations far more complex than a single human mind ever could. But as Marshall McLuhan pointed out, the relationship between human and machine is not a one-way street. As a person digs a hole with a spade, the spade acts upon the person. The point of using a spade to dig a hole is that the user knows that the tool will allow them to do the job more effectively. In choosing a spade, the user accepts that there are some things that a spade *cannot* do. There are also some effects that the use of a spade will impose upon the user that they might not have chosen. A spade is useful — *very* useful if you want to dig a hole. But it is not a person.

The same is true of a teledildonic sex aid, or a digital machine like a computer. The replication and extension of human activity is at the heart of digital culture. A digital machine or computer can perform functions that are *like* a human being, including replicating sexual and other forms of touch. It may do them more efficiently and effectively than any human could. But computers and humans are not the same. A person using a computer knows that the computer can do some things very well, but there are other things that a computer cannot do well, and there are ways in which a computer acts upon a person in the process, some of which may be very subtle or even go completely unnoticed. In the words of Katherine Hayles, "The computer molds

the human even as the human builds the computer."[15] There will be gains and losses involved in digitally synthesised touch.

One of the difficulties inherent in this is that digital technology is developing very swiftly. It is challenging to keep up with progress, and it is not easy to discern which developments are likely to be culturally significant. This difficulty is heightened by the tendency for hype to outrun reality, especially at the margins of digital technology where much of the commercial sex industry is located. My intention is not to investigate specific technologies or applications such as online pornography, teledildonics or social media, but to take a broad view of the cultural impact of digital technologies and communications, and to ask what a theology of touch might look like in an age of haptic technology.

Perhaps it seems that 'remote touch' is an oxymoron. Later, I will argue that digitally mediated touch, whilst meaningful, is intrinsically less complex and culturally rich than that which it emulates. First, let me back up, and look at an instance of what I am calling 'plain touch'.

2   Plain touch

A person's finger brushes against the exposed skin of another person. What has happened? Well, for a start, they both felt something. There has been a sensation in both people. As a result of one action, nerve endings have been stimulated, and neurons have fired in two separate brains. But that hardly begins to contain the significance of the action. A connection has been made between two people, and that connection has a cultural content as well as a physiological one. Intentionally or tacitly, both parties will begin to interpret the meaning of the touch. Was it deliberate, or accidental; friendly, or hostile; mundane, or sexually arousing? It may have been a

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[15] N. Katherine Hayles, 'Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers' in *October*, 66 (1993), 90.

scratch, a poke or a caress. It may have been heavy with meaning or quite casual. Then again, language provides a wide and potentially confusing range of analogies for the act. One party might feel deeply 'touched' by the encounter, while the other might be feeling rather 'touchy' about what has happened.

To complicate things further, it may not be clear who initiated the touch. Was there a touch*er* and a touch*ee*? How could anyone tell objectively which was which? Either way, both parties felt the touch, and for each of the individuals, it meant something. At the very least it meant that they are not alone. There is someone out there. But it also meant something more reflexive and personal. The touch suggests not only that there is someone *out there*, but also that there is someone *in here*: that I am someone who can both touch and be touched.

But can we be sure that it was a some*one* and not a some*thing*? Perhaps one or other of the parties wasn't human at all, but was actually an object, or a machine mistaken for a human being. If what was happening in the encounter was a person touching an object, how would that change our understanding of what happened? The person who sensed the touch might not be certain that the 'someone out there' was actually some*one*, though they have still been made aware at some level, explicitly or intrinsically, that they *themselves* are a someone. Perhaps, after all, the sense of touch doesn't provide assurance of community, but the reverse. If the only thing we can be reasonably certain of is the inner sensation of the touch, perhaps it is evidence of our being ultimately alone.

What if neither of the parties to the encounter described above was human (or animal)? There's no doubt that two objects can butt up against each other with no space between them, just as my computer is currently touching my desk. If they were equipped with the right mechanical sensors they may in some sense 'know' that they were being touched, and might respond to it. But what does it mean to say that two objects have touched, if neither of them has experienced any sensation, or has the capacity to place the experience in a meaningful cultural context? Surely two

inanimate objects touching each other is a vastly different event from either one or two sentient beings touching each other, whether deliberately or accidentally.

So far we have barely scratched the surface. All of these questions arise from a simple touch. Together, they bring me to asking how artificial representations of human touch that involve non-human objects, such as touch that is digitally mediated or synthesised by complex machines,[16] might differ in meaning, and particularly in theological interpretation, from fully embodied human interaction. I want to test the hypothesis that plain human touch is irreducible, so that there is a fundamental difference in value and significance between touching some*one* and touching some*thing*, and that aspects of the emerging digital culture impact the cultural logic and theology of touch.

To do this I will need to consider how we understand touch and its place among the senses, its phenomenological significance, its role in the perceptions of persons in community, and some of the political and philosophical meanings attached to it. I will explore some of the theological meanings of human touch, including the concept of sacrament, classically defined by Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century, and summed up in *The Book of Common Prayer* as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace".[17] I will suggest that plain touch has sacramental qualities that the touch of a machine, or even of a living but non-human creature, does not.

I will need to consider the nature of analogy: to ask what it would mean to say that the touch of a machine is *like* the touch of a human being? Finally, I will consider some of the theological and/or ethical questions that might arise in a digital context, where the receptivity and responsiveness of human touch can be digitally or mechanically mediated or emulated.

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[16] Throughout this thesis I will use the word 'machine' to embrace computers and other electronic digital equipment as well as purely mechanical tools.

[17] *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 345.

3   Keeping in touch without touching

We are getting used to 'meeting' people in ways that exclude physical contact. The widespread lockdown in response to the global pandemic of COVID-19 led to a normalisation of the use of online platforms to meet 'virtually' rather than in embodied person. It came at a moment when technologies were newly available to make this kind of connection possible. Even five years earlier, such extensive reliance on digital communication would have been unthinkable in most contexts. Businesses, churches and social gatherings were challenged to discover new models of interaction, and in doing so to explore the meaning and purpose of human interface, and the ways that it is affected by mechanical intervention. Communities of faith in particular, which are habitually formed around regular embodied gatherings of people, were forced to consider in what sense it is possible or desirable to meet online rather than in person. What is gained or lost in human contact and communion when contiguity and concurrency are removed?

Being 'in touch' in digital space or through mechanical channels of communication is not the same as meeting in the conventional sense. There is a difference between meeting a person in the same room, at a specific point in time, and meeting the same person online. The key difference might be reduced to the impossibility of physically touching a person via an online medium. There is no doubt that a meeting of persons can take place via the internet, but the dimension of plain touch is lost in a digitally mediated transaction. This new era, in which I can relate to a person who is not present to me in space, and possibly not in time either, requires renewed reflection on the theological meaning and significance of touch.

The priority of embodied presence, predicated on the incarnation of God in Christ, has been fundamental to Christian thinking and practice, but elements of that thinking and practice now need to come to terms with the new possibilities of digital culture. As humanity embraces digital technologies, cultural and theological constructions of the personhood and sacramentality of the human body are being shaped by the possibilities of radically disembodied presence, cyborgism and transhumanism.

Two examples will suffice for now. In most church traditions, it has historically been taken for granted that the physical touch involved in laying on of hands for healing or commissioning, or the physical handling of the eucharistic elements for consecration, are fundamental to their efficacy. During the pandemic lockdowns, when such practices were largely unavailable, there were urgent debates amongst theologians and church leaders as to whether persons could be ordained, or elements consecrated, online.[18]

The rise of the internet has posed a new set of issues in Christian ethics too. For example, in the latter part of the twentieth century, much of the teaching of sexual ethics to Christian teenagers focussed on conventions around who might touch who, and where and how they might be touched. Those who want to discuss sexual ethics with teenagers now find themselves having to ask how those relatively crude touch-based ethics need to be adapted, when quasi-sexual encounters (such as the sending of 'nudes') can be conducted digitally, without physical co-presence.

Given the weight that Christian theology and ethics have placed on interpersonal touch in the conventional sense, there is a need to consider what difference it makes if

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[18] These debates were not entirely new. In 1931, when radio broadcasting was in its infancy, Vatican Radio was commissioned by Pius XI, and built by Guglielmo Marconi. Discussion soon followed about whether participation in the eucharist via a radio broadcast was a valid sacrament. Much of the discussion was pragmatic: if Roman Catholic lay people could receive the sacrament via the radio, would they still bother to come to parish mass? After consultation with theologians, in 1936 the Holy See allowed that the Eucharist could be broadcast over the radio, with the provision that, for those who are physically able to go to church, listening to the radio broadcast is not the fulfilment of the obligation to participate in the Sunday Mass. In 1998, when TV was established and the internet was becoming widely available, Pope John Paul II repeated this position, whilst acknowledging that participation in the eucharist in broadcast form could have some spiritual value.

Most recently, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic bishops in Poland decreed that whilst a eucharistic service relayed by radio had some efficacy, a similar eucharist celebrated via a podcast did not. The explanation was that radio had at least a simultaneity of time if not place, whereas a podcast might have neither.

that touch is synthesised or digitally mediated. For example, Christian ethics has placed considerable weight on faithfulness and exclusivity in marriage. In what ways is that faithfulness maintained or compromised if one of the partners has an intimate sexual engagement with a machine impersonating a real person?

If a touch that is represented or mediated in a digital format is other than fully personal, what is its status? What is the appropriate dignity to accord to that representation, particularly if that representation has been delayed, distorted or manipulated, either deliberately or unconsciously, in the process of transmission? These issues will become all the more acute as digital representation of persons becomes more sophisticated, and moves beyond the two-dimensional image on a screen to a three-dimensional representation, in which sight, sound and even touch can be digitally mediated or mechanically synthesised. It is conceivable that technological developments might approach the point where the mechanical representation of a person or object is functionally indistinguishable from the original. Indeed, this is one of the assumed goals in the development of Artificial Intelligence.

None of this is reason to shy away from technological progress, even if it were possible to do so. Elaine Graham, for example, typically encourages creative engagement with technology. But she emphasises the need to do so with a clear eye on the significance of personhood in community.

> To be human is already to be in a web of relationships, where our humanity can only be articulated—iterated—in and through our environment, our tools, our artefacts, and the networks of human and nonhuman life around us. It also means, I think, that we do not need to be afraid of our complicity with technologies, or fear our hybridity, or assume that proper knowledge of and access to God can only come through a withdrawal from these activities of world-building.[19]

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[19] Elaine Graham, 'Post/Human Conditions', *Theology and Sexuality,* 10.2 (2004), 27–28.

In order to explore the significance of touch that is synthesised or mediated, we will need to have a clear sense of the significance of touch in its conventional modes — and this is by no means straightforward. Aristotle suggested that touch was primary among the senses in allowing the direct unmediated perception of reality, and so disclosing an object in its truth, because touch enables us to sense an object and its being simultaneously. Where the other senses require intellectual interpretation, he argued that touch alone allows us to sense the existence of an object directly, the perception and the interpretation of its presence being identical. For this reason, Aristotle regarded touch as the base sense, fundamental to human existence. One implication of this might be that touch that is synthesised or mediated fundamentally changes the nature of the encounter. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was also committed to the irreducible first person character of experience — to the absolute necessity of presence in space and time for a person to lay hold on the meaning of any object or event — though he did not recognise the primacy of a single sense, but the combination of sense experience.

This thesis is broadly about touch in a technological age, but at times I have chosen to pay particular attention to the ways that issues of perception and representation apply to human sexual interaction. My own theological journey in this field follows a narrowing progression from thinking about the impact of digital culture on conceptions of personhood, to questions about embodiment and mimesis in a substantially disembodied context, to the unique significance of touch. At this stage it would have been possible to pursue a number of avenues. For example, it would have been interesting to write about the role of touch in nurture and personal care, which is a significant field in the development of robotics. Equally it would have been challenging to write about touch in the context of violence, which is an area of perennial concern in the development of digital culture and especially gaming. I have not gone far down those routes. Instead, where it has felt appropriate to draw examples from a particular sphere, I have tended to focus on sexual touch. There are a number of reasons for this focus. Sex, and the commodification of sex, is a very significant driver of digital culture, especially at a popular level. Sex also has a broad and fascinating significance in the historical development of Christian spirituality and

ethics. Rowan Williams' early work on theological anthropology, whilst fundamentally trinitarian, situates human sexuality at its core. So whilst I will give examples of the outworking of a sacramental theology of touch in a number of different areas, sexual touch will be a major focus.

My primary reason for this focus is that a sexual encounter between two embodied persons, meeting in physical space and time, would seem to be the most 'stripped-down', vulnerable and human expression of touch. Digital mediation allows for variations on this fundamental encounter. The availability of increasingly realistic (or artistically generated) representations of sex through online pornography, virtual reality and 'intelligent' android or gynoid robots raises questions about the meaning of a sexual encounter in which one or more of the parties is represented digitally or mechanically.

In his *Pieces sur l'art* (1936) Paul Valéry wrote that

> In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial.[20]

There is such a strong correlation between sex and the expressive arts that it would be true to say that in much sexual expression 'there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power.' It would seem that sex is fundamentally changed when the persons involved are not present to each other's touch in space and time. We need to ask what value we should attach to sexual behaviour that takes place independently of the realms of space and time, where a representational element plays a significant role. What does it mean to engage in sex without touch?

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[20] Paul Valéry, *Pièces Sur l'art* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2014), quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Benjamin, *Illuminations,* ed. by Hannah Arendt, (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211.

These questions arise at a confluence of thought, where strands of twentieth century continental philosophy and psychology meet with the vertiginous technological determinism of Silicon Valley and the dominance of individualism in contemporary economic and social ethics. This is what Walter Benjamin called one of those "long periods of history [during which] the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence".[21] We are required to consider the status of a mechanically reproduced or digitally simulated object, be it a human being, a work of art, or some blend of the two, and the nature of human objectivity and subjectivity. If we apply these questions to the sense of touch, we are led to ask whether touch is fungible. In other words, can one instance or expression of touch be replicated or exchanged for another without any loss of meaning or value? Or is touch specific, meaning that the touch of a particular person at a specific place and time is unique to that place and time, and to the person giving or receiving it? To answer these questions we will need to consider whether there is a difference between touching some*one* and touching some*thing*.

First, though, we need to establish a little more clearly what we mean by touch, and where it sits in the taxonomy of human senses.

4   Dimensions of touch

More than any other sense, the very definition of touch is cloaked in ambiguity. It is conceptually slippery. It is not even clear what the limits of that definition might be: whether the 'external'[22] haptic sense is to be regarded as a separate sense from the 'internal' perceptions of balance, kinaesthesia (the sense of movement) and proprioception (the sense of position in space). It is not at all self-evident what we

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[21] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 211.

[22] In the next chapter it will become clear that Aristotle did not regard touch as an external sense.

mean by touch. It is clear that physiology is an important aspect of touch, but an understanding of touch that is purely based on physiology does not take sufficient account of its essential context in non-verbal social communication and emotion. Though physiologically they might be very similar, there is a world of difference between a finger touching a wooden desk, the same finger touching the forearm of a stranger, and the same finger touching the inner thigh of a friend. Nor would a purely physiological approach recognise the range of linguistic and allegorical associations that flow from it. Then there is the complexity of understanding the role of touch in human perception, and its place among the senses. Then there are the complex and fluid social and political dimensions of touch, which are central to its meanings in human interaction. We will discover that there is no comprehensive or 'natural' definition of touch that is underneath or behind the discursive constructions we make of it.

Of the five classically recognised senses — touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight — touch is surely the most ambiguous: the hardest to get a grip on. Touch is unique. The other four senses are primarily exteroceptive, meaning that they are perceived as responses to objective stimuli external to the person. Touch is different, in that it may also be interoceptive. We use touch to describe a basket of experiences that are not easily measurable and not readily shareable, such as proprioception,[23] kinaesthesia, and our vestibular sense (our sense of balance, or 'rightness' of position in relation to external objects). Roger Smith writes of the enduring claim that conscious awareness,

[23] The term proprioception (sometimes referred to as 'the sixth sense') was coined in 1906 by Charles Scott Sherrington to refer to the person's internal sense of their position and movement, and is closely intertwined with constructions of touch. Proprioception was distinguished from kinaesthesia, which was the person's sense of their place and position in relation to external objects. Sherrington also sought to distinguish 'interoceptors', which provide information about sensations internal to the body, from 'exteroceptors', the organs that provide information originating outside the body, such as the eyes, ears, mouth, and skin. In the nineteenth century there was disagreement as to whether there were causal forces external to human beings, or whether the universe was wholly passive. Some certainly believed that the experience of resistance in the world implied a creator God, and that humans had been uniquely ordained for mastery through force.

inseparable from a person's sense of being alive, originated with activity encountering resistance.[24]

These dimensions combine with the more literal sense of tactile stimulation of the skin, the primary organ of touch, to create a wider perception of spatial environment which we might call 'haptic'. Some have suggested that these experiences should be regarded as part of a far broader taxonomy of senses. They argue, for example, that it doesn't make sense to use the same verb to describe *feeling* a brick and *feeling* dizzy. David Linden reminds us that emotions are often semantically constructed as feelings, as in 'you are so prickly' or 'I'm touched by your concern'.[25] Others, such as the film theorist Vivian Sobchack,[26] wonder if the differentiation of senses does justice to our actual experience at all, given that our 'felt' perception of ourselves is unified. In practice we do not experience our bodies as having senses, but as being sensitive.

A further caveat follows concerning the phenomenology of perception, and in particular the ambiguity of touch and feeling. Thinkers from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty, for whom the body is central to perception, have seen touch as the lodestar of the senses, whilst at the other extreme a thoroughgoing physicalist might avoid many of the complexities of phenomenology by reference to a reductive and functionalist materialism. They might argue that touch is no more than a bio-mechanical activity stimulated by, and stimulating, electro-chemical responses.

That one cannot be alive in any normal sense without the sense of touch was recognised by empiricist philosopher John Locke in his 1689 'Essay Concerning Human Understanding.'

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[24] Roger Smith, 'Kinaesthesia and Touching Reality', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century,* 19 (2014).

[25] David J. Linden, *Touch: The Science of the Sense that Makes Us Human* (London: Penguin, 2016), 3.

[26] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 217.

> Whether we move or rest, in what posture soever we are, we always feel something under us that supports us, and hinders our further sinking downwards.[27]

Locke called this quality 'solidity'. A person deprived of every other bodily sense will nevertheless have weight which presses them toward the ground. Touch, then, is uniquely constitutive of being an embodied subject. However, the definition of touch and its role among the senses are contested, and its role in human perception and interaction goes beyond the merely physiological. Matthew Ratcliffe concludes his paper 'What is Touch?' by stating that "the heterogeneity of touch makes it both distinctive and particularly problematic."[28]

In the remainder of this chapter and the next, I will address the meanings of touch with reference to a range of disciplines including physiology, semantics, and philosophy. Alongside looking at what touch *is*, it will be important to look at what touch *does* — what it contributes to human beings' understanding of our location in the world. I will do this by exploring the phenomenology of touch, and then (after a very brief excursus on the phenomenology of pregnancy), the theological dimensions of touch. I do this, not in an effort to find a reductive definition, but in the understanding that the meaning of touch is a rich but confusing combination of physiology, semantics and cultural meaning. It bounces somewhat uncomfortably between the mechanical and the philosophical, and between the shallow and the profound. It is hard to put your finger on it.

Before going too much further, it seems important to include a brief note on the physiology of touch.

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[27] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by A. S. Pringle-Pattison (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 57.

[28] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'What Is Touch?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* 90 (2012), 413.

5   A brief note on the physiology of touch

The hand is the most developed of the sense receptors in terms of motility, in that it has the capacity to extend from the body and can be manipulated to meet the object of touch. The finger however, has no muscles of its own at all. The ultra-fine motion control of which fingers are capable is generated by muscles in the palm and forearm. These are connected to tendons to provide a high degree of motion control. The average human being is equipped with ten of these devices, conveniently located in groups of five on each arm. The fingers are also mounted on a fully-flexible wrist that gives them almost infinite mobility. Two of the fingers have been adapted into thumbs. They are opposable, meaning that they are capable of meeting the other fingers tip to tip in a pincer movement. This incredibly useful feature is shared only with the higher apes. Sir Isaac Newton is said to have remarked that "In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence."[29] And he had two of them! This may not stand up as an argument for the existence of God, but in itself, it represents a legitimate reason for awe.

In evolutionary terms the foreshortening of the palm and the extension of the thumb occurred after humans split from our last common ancestor, the chimpanzees. It enables what biologist Mary Marzke calls the "forceful precision grip"[30] that gives humans an advantage over all other primates in terms of the creation and use of tools, including weapons.

Functionally, a finger is a dual purpose tool for exploring and also controlling the environment. It is so well-adapted that nine times out of ten it is possible to touch something and understand it, even without being able to see it. Human brains have

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[29] This thought was attributed to Sir Isaac Newton by Charles Dickens in 'All the Year Round' (1864), Vol. 10, 346. It was later reprinted in A. R. Craig, *The Book of the Hand* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1867), 51.

[30] Mary W. Marzke, 'Tool Making, Hand Morphology and Fossil Hominins', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 368 no. 1630 (2013), 1–8.

adapted so that they notice tiny movements of another person's fingers across a huge distance, as any orchestral conductor knows. Opposable thumbs mean that human beings can lock hands in a way that is unknown anywhere else in the animal kingdom. Human to human touch is a simple but intense and powerful exchange of information.

For all of this complexity and, frankly, wonder, it is clear that to understand touch only as a collection of ecstatic presentments to consciousness is to underestimate its role in the wider engagements of body and world, and particularly of person and other. Digital culture can downgrade the human finger to a crude pointing device to deliver taps, pinches and swipes on a mobile phone, but however sophisticated the application it is the finger, not the screen, that should be the real source of wonder.

From a purely physiological viewpoint, touch could be defined as "the stimulation of the skin by thermal, mechanical, chemical or electrical stimuli".[31] In humans, the sensation of touch is almost entirely mediated by the skin. Skin is part of the integumentary system and has multiple functions. Amongst others it serves to contain and protect the deeper organs, to provide cushioning and waterproofing for the body, to synthesise Vitamin D and to excrete liquid waste. The skin of a foetus is already highly developed after eight weeks' gestation. In an adult human, skin represents about 18% of the mass of the body, weighs around four kilos and has a surface area of approximately 1.6 square metres. Partly as a consequence of its exposed location on the body, the skin sheds and replaces around a million cells an hour. Skin is amongst the last organs to fail at death.

Besides its other functions, skin is the primary organ of touch sensation. In a healthy human, the skin is capable of detecting a complex range of sensations including pressure, pain, temperature and movement. Unlike most of the other sense organs, which are located in cavities in the body and can be withdrawn from service at will, the

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[31] Tiffany Field, *Touch*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 87.

skin is 'always on'. It is not fanciful to think of the skin as an exposed portion of the central nervous system.

Touch stimuli are communicated to the central nervous system through a variety of different types of nerve. 'C fibres' are innate and polymodal, detecting thermal, mechanical and chemical stimuli. They are relatively slow in conducting sensations, which are processed in the limbic cortex. It is this slow response that allows a person to walk across hot coals without pain, only to feel the burning sensation moments later. This is a primitive and virtually universal form of nerve transmission. In contrast, 'A fibres' are processed in the somatosensory cortex, and are developed in response to experience.

The skin on the fingertip has several layers, and embedded in them are millions of receptors that respond to stimulation. Thermoreceptors enable the skin to sense heat; nociceptors create a sensation of pain when stimulated; four different types of mechanoreceptors respond to variations in pressure, vibrations and stretching of the skin. They are packed with capillaries less than ten micrometres in diameter, making the fingers ultra-sensitive. Nerve cells communicate with each other by secreting molecules that transmit signals to the brain at a speed of about 170 miles per hour. The maximum density of these sense receptors is found in the fingertips and genitals.

Each finger relates to a distinct area of the brain where the signals are processed, evaluated and co-ordinated, so as well as being interchangeable for some tasks, they can work in concert (literally, if you are a musician). 'Instructions' can be transmitted from the brain through the nerves and back to the muscles at around 250 miles per hour, resulting in movement or other responses.

The cells that detect the shape of objects touching the skin are located between the dermis and epidermis. They are called 'Merkel disks', after Friedrich Merkel, who identified them in 1875. He originally called them *tastzellen* or 'touch cells'. Merkel disks are present at particularly high densities in the fingertips and lips. The cells that detect the stretching of the skin are located deeper in the dermis and are called

'Ruffini endings'. They can detect a movement as small as 0.00001 mm. The fingertips are ridged with fingerprints which are almost unique to each individual and endure throughout life. They aid in the detection of vibrations, and enhance grip in wet conditions. When Merkel disks and Ruffini endings sense shape or stretching in the skin they send repeated electrical 'spikes' through dedicated nerve fibres to the spinal cord, and from there to the brain. The level of detail at which this processing takes place is incredible. Professor Mark Rutland of the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm has calculated that a human finger can feel a bump corresponding to the size of a single molecule. That enables the finger to discriminate between surfaces that are flat and those that have ridges as small as 13 nanometres high. By comparison, if a finger was the size of the Earth, it could feel the difference between houses and cars.

Perhaps surprisingly, the areas of the skin that are most obviously involved in sexual stimulation, such as the clitoris, the glans penis, and the nipples, are under- rather than over-supplied with touch-sensitive mechanoreceptors. What they do have in abundance are nerves with ragged endings called mucocutaneous end-organs (or sometimes genital end bulbs — though they are not only found in the genitals). These nerves are particularly sensitive to heat and cold, pain and inflammation.

The route by which the stimulation of the skin in these areas passes from the mucocutaneous end-organs to the brain may be significant in the understanding of the role of touch in sexual arousal. In both men and women, sensations from the entire perigenital area pass through the pudendal nerve, which is common to both sexes. In women, sensations from the deeper tissues, the cervix and the uterus, pass through the hypogastric nerve. Both the pudendal nerve and the hypogastric nerve meet the lower end of the spinal cord. In women, deep stimulation is also reported through the vagus nerve, which bypasses the spinal cord and connects directly with the brain.[32]

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[32] Research has shown that women who have suffered complete spinal cord injury may still experience orgasm via the vagus nerve, which can transmit signals directly from the clitoris and cervix to the brain.

Whilst scientists used to believe that the skin contained specific pain receptors, most now acknowledge that what we understand as pain is generated in the brain. Indeed, the brain is capable of generating 'phantom' responses, such that "simply observing someone touching or being touched can feel like being touched".[33] It is clear, as David Linden suggests, that the brute facts of a purely physiological approach don't come close to telling the whole story of touch. "There is [...] no pure touch sensation, for by the time we have perceived a touch, it has been blended with other sensory input, plans for action, expectations, and a healthy dose of emotion."[34]

There is much that is unclear about the physiology of sexual stimulation, but there are two points to note at this stage. The first is that in essence, sexual touch is no different physiologically from other forms of touch. It is detected and conveyed to the brain in identical ways to non-sexual touch. In other words, what makes sexual touch distinct from other forms of touch is a series of additional factors such as context and culture. The second point to note is that by the time it reaches the brain, sexual stimulation has effectively blended with other touch stimuli, so that it becomes a part, albeit a distinctive part, of a whole-person experience.

One implication of this is that if one wishes to synthesise sexual stimulation by mechanical or neurological intervention, it would be possible to do so without stimulating the sexual organs themselves, by intervening higher up the neural pathway, or by stimulating the brain itself. Slavoj Žižek writes somewhat excitedly about this prospect as offering a post-human or hyperreal experience.

> An even more "real" approach is opened up by the prospect of the direct manipulation of our neurons: although not "real" in the sense of being part of the reality in which we live, this pain is impossible-real [...] What we experience here at its purest is thus the gap between reality and the Real: the Real of, say, the sexual pleasure generated by direct

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[33] Field, *Touch*, 105.

[34] Linden, *Touch,* 6.

neuronal intervention does not take place in the reality of bodily contacts, yet it is "more real than reality", more intense.[35]

We are entering new territory here. What are the stakes?

At least two new and significant things are happening to the representation of touch in digital culture. The first is that communication and representation are now habitually separated from physicality and temporality. The second is that, in common with the advances in simulation of visual and aural senses, synthetic touch is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from plain touch. These developments require us to address a novel but highly important question: can the sensation of touch be synthesised or digitally transmitted without loss of meaning? To put it another way, is touch fungible?

6   Is touch fungible?

The past decade has seen a good deal of discussion of the notion of fungibility. The discussion has arisen because of the development of 'non-fungible tokens' associated with digital works of art, music, games and films. A non-fungible token (NFT) is a non-interchangeable unit of data stored on a blockchain, a form of digital ledger. Each token is uniquely identifiable, so that (in theory at least) it can be traded, but it cannot be replicated. NFT ledgers claim to provide a public certificate of authenticity or proof of ownership of a digital text. However, the legal rights conveyed by an NFT remain unclear. NFTs cannot restrict the sharing or copying of the underlying digital files and do not prevent the creation of NFTs with identical associated files. They give the purchaser a right to claim ownership of the artefact, but since the artefact itself is not covered by copyright, there is little to prevent a third party from creating an identical digital artefact with its own associated NFT. Consequently, the value of an NFT is

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[35] Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 99.

highly contested, and its worth can only be measured by what someone is prepared to give in exchange for the 'bragging rights' associated with ownership.

The word fungible literally means capable of being used in place of another without loss, capable of being wholly replaced. The concept of fungibility (or non-fungibility) has a long history in Medieval economics, describing goods that are discrete, but can be exchanged with no loss or difference. Gold is paradigmatically fungible, since a bar of pure gold weighing one gram can be exchanged for another bar of pure gold weighing one gram without any noticeable or actual gain or loss in the process. Paper money is almost entirely fungible, since any ten pound note is worth the same as any other ten pound note. Two five pound notes are also usually worth exactly the same as one ten pound note.[36] Some goods are functionally fungible too. If I order a new book from an online trader, any copy that arrives from the warehouse will do just as well as any other copy. The particularity of the physical copy is irrelevant.

At the heart of this thesis I will be asking whether human touch is fungible. To put it another way, can the sensation of touch be synthesised or digitally transmitted without loss of meaning? What exactly is gained or lost if we swap out the experience of plain touch, and swap in a haptic simulation, such as a teledildonic device?

We know that in digital culture, potentially valid analogues of human touch can be delivered. This is widely explored in contemporary science fiction,[37] and the

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[36] I say '*almost* fungible' to allow that in exceptional circumstances a ten pound note might be worth more than its face value — perhaps because it contains a printing error making it a collector's item. It is also possible that an individual might for some reason prefer collecting ten pound notes to five pound notes (or vice versa), and therefore attach a slightly higher value to them.

[37] Two examples are Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), in which a man develops an intense relationship with an artificially intelligent personal assistant, and the Channel 4 series *Humans* (2015–18), in which anthropomorphic robots called 'synths' join a family as domestic and sexual servants. It is notable that in both of these cases, and in the case of the teledildonic devices described earlier, male sexual fulfilment is prioritised. There will be more to say later about the gendered nature of synthesised touch.

teledildonic devices that I described at the start of this chapter provide a simple example that is commercially available. I will explore the extent to which digitally mediated or synthesised touch is like or unlike unmediated human touch, and what, if anything, is gained or lost in its replication. Through a conversation with the theological anthropology of Rowan Williams (chapters three and four), informed by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (chapter two), I want to test my assumption that touch is essentially located, relational, self-interpreted and culturally specific. This would imply that an experience of touch that is synthesised or digitally mediated has a significantly different value from an experience of inter-personal touch. In other words, there is a significant difference between touching some*one* and touching some*thing*.

My opening thesis, then, is that plain human touch is irreducible, meaning that it is *non-fungible*; that digitally mediated or synthesised touch cannot bear the same unique and theologically vital ontological and cultural heft as plain human touch. If it is the case that touch has a unique role in the construction of human relationships, such that the particularity of the touch of a person is theologically significant, then it will be important to consider how the emerging digital culture might impact the cultural logic and theology of touch.

I will follow Rowan Williams' Wittgensteinian idea that selfhood is a product of social negotiation — that we discover that we are human as we find ourselves being treated humanely by an other in the present. Personal significance is therefore essentially located in time and space, and touch has a definitive part to play in this discovery, partly because it occurs at the physical boundary of the body.

Touch has a special place in the constitution of inter-personal relationships, because it is the closest that two persons can get to becoming one. Touch is a uniquely reflexive and therefore generative sense. Violent touch and sexual touch are special cases, because they emphasise the individuality of the persons, and the impossibility of overcoming bodiliness within a cultural context. I will suggest that touch belongs at the heart of Christian thought because it has a sacramental character, meaning that a

place where humans touch is always significant, and has potential to be a locus of grace. By that I mean that the event of touch opens the possibility for the incursion of God into human time and space, with generative outcomes that exceed the merely physical. The incarnate Christ, who is understood by Christians as God made tangible, is the archetype of this. In the incarnation Jesus both reframed and redeemed human touch.

Contemporary culture — which, ironically, we sometimes call 'digital' — risks devaluing and desacralizing touch by interposing technological, and therefore commercial and political, agents between practically disembodied persons. By offering synthesised or extensively mediated interactions, digital culture is radically changing perceptions of touch, and therefore of personhood. This tends to dehumanise, because it disconnects communication from space and time — a change that the other senses might accommodate, but touch cannot.

7   Methodology

In developing this work I have drawn on constructive theology as a method. Constructive theology is a mode of practice that developed organically in the first half of the twentieth century, and was codified from around 1975, largely through the Working Group on Constructive Theology at the Vanderbilt Divinity School.[38] It borrows freely from dogmatic and systematic approaches to theology, but then defines itself against them. According to Wyman,

> Constructive theology owes much of its vocabulary, including its doctrinal vocabulary, as well as its systematic bent - to systematic theology. To dogmatic theology - especially twentieth century

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[38] A brief history of this development is provided in Jason Wyman, 'Constructive Theology: History, Movement, Method', in *What is Constructive Theology?: Histories, Methodologies and Perspectives*, ed. by Marion Grau and Jason Wyman (London: T. and T. Clark, 2020), 9-30.

versions of it, it owes a suspicion of systematization and commitment to an investigation of theological claims as a matter that concerns both the academy and the church.[39]

Constructive theology is located in the interplay between theology and culture. It is a mode of theological work that allows for broad and syncretistic thinking that is informed by the wisdom of Christianity as well as a consciously wide range of non-theological disciplines. Karen O'Donnell's 'four principles of constructive theology' are

> a recognition of change or development taking place; a mandate to draw on resources both within and beyond the Christian tradition; an identification of a multitude of theologies; and finally, the construction of a theology that is in continuity with the goods deeply embedded in the tradition of Christian faith.[40]

Constructive theology is confessional, but it is not constrained by any ecclesial or devotional dogma. It doesn't seek finality or normativity. It is unafraid to be provisional, to welcome mystery as a category, and to include self-contradictory possibilities. John J. Thatamanil states that "constructive theologians forthrightly name that theology is a work of human construction."[41] In other words, all significant sociological and cultural systems are ultimately contingent. Of course, it could well be said that these qualities apply to all theological work, given that, as Sallie McFague points out,[42] all language is a form of construction, and therefore the changing forms

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[39] Jason Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xxviii.

[40] Karen O'Donnell, 'The Voices of the Marys: Towards a Method in Feminist Trauma Theologies' in *Feminist Trauma Theologies: Body, Scripture and Church in Critical Perspective* (London: SCM, 2020), 5.

[41] John J. Thatamanil, 'Constructed Theology as Theopoetics: Theological Construction as Divine-Human Creativity', in *What is Constructive Theology?: Histories, Methodologies and Perspectives*, ed. by Marion Grau and Jason Wyman (London: T. and T. Clark, 2020), 32.

[42] Sallie McFague, 'Parable, Metaphor and Theology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42.4 (December 1974), 630.

of language mean that every theological statement is provisional. Wyman reminds us that culture is "both a source for theology, and an expression of it".[43] As a result there is a necessary provisionality about it. Constructive theologians make a point of owning the "contextuality, experimentality, fallibility and creativity"[44] of their craft.

Some wish to take this further. One of the acknowledged pioneers of constructive theology was Bernard Meland. In his book *The Reawakening of Christian Faith*, he wrote that "Constructive theology...pursues a formulation of the cognitive meanings of the Christian faith".[45] Wyman explains that "this posits the nature of Christian faith, as expounded in Christian theology, as being anchored in mental, linguistic processes, not an independent existent reality".[46] This fully constructivist position is further than I am prepared to (or feel the need to) go. Even if theological realism has sometimes been used to support anti-intellectualism and even exploitation, it is surely unjustified to exclude it *a priori* from theological consideration. The notion of mystery, which was important to the constructive theologians at Vanderbilt, makes little sense in a wholly constructivist context. For my purposes, the apophatic approach of Lossky and Williams provides more than enough room for an objective experience of the reality of God, with a constant reminder that its interpretation is provisional and beyond words. When it comes to understanding touch, the beyond-words-ness is exactly the point.

Perhaps ironically, alongside this sense of mystery there is a sense of concreteness in exploring the phenomenon of touch. All theology is constructed upon bodily experience. What else do human beings have to go on? Heike Peckruhn says that "As humans we are 'bodyselves', doubly intertwined in our existence as body-mind and as

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[43] Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology*, 28.

[44] Thatanamil, 'Constructed Theology as Theopoetics', 50.

[45] Bernard Meland, *The Reawakening of Christian Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 89.

[46] Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology*, 18.

self-others/world [sic]."[47] That must be particularly true for the theological exploration of a largely subjective sensation such as touch. Peckruhn offers an encouragement and a warning. The encouragement is that

> when explicitly employed as a source, bodies and experiences have been approached in a variety of ways, from mapping theology onto bodies, utilizing bodies to make subversive claims, and constructing body metaphor theology, to constructing meaning with contextual bodies, and even conceiving of bodies themselves as theological tools.[48]

The warning is that

> bodily experience is a contested and paradoxical space. It is sociopolitical and intensely personal, unavoidable and problematic, foundational and suspicious.[49]

That quickly raises the issue of whose experience I am seeking to understand. In particular I need to take note of the gendered experience of touch. It would be reckless to suggest that men's experience of touch is identical to women's experience, and that there is no theological distinction between them. I don't intend to explore that distinction in depth in this thesis, but I have written about it below.[50] I note it, and recognise that it would be a fruitful area for further theological research.

Constructive theology is intrinsically conversational. Wyman notes that it is "upon engaging historical theology and Christian witness with the findings of other disciplines

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[47] Heike Peckruhn, 'Embodied Knowing: Body, Epistemology, Context and Hermeneutics' in *What is Constructive Theology?: Histories, Methodologies and Perspectives*, ed. by Marion Grau and Jason Wyman (London: T. and T. Clark, 2020), 86.

[48] Peckruhn, 'Embodied Knowing: Body, Epistemology, Context and Hermeneutics', 78.

[49] Peckruhn, 'Embodied Knowing: Body, Epistemology, Context and Hermeneutics', 77.

[50] See section on the gendered nature of touch in chapter five, section 3.5.1, (pages 197-203).

[that] the crucial step of theological construction happens."[51] However, he also notes that the potential interlocutors for constructive theology are innumerable. To keep the exercise manageable it is necessary to select conversation partners who seem to offer fruitful possibilities. In this case I have chosen three primary conversation partners. I have reflected extensively on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenologists who preceded him; I have entered into conversation with the theologian and priest Rowan Williams; and I have given consideration to the Biblical texts and the way that touch is portrayed in them. These three conversation partners are at the same time, not sufficient, but also too much for a single project on this scale.

Constructive theology is an activist mode. From their foundations, constructive theologies have sought to be "justice oriented, and geared toward active, life-giving change in the world".[52] Marion Grau adds that it is a "counter-hegemonic and anti-oppressive discourse."[53] It is a mode that has provided an umbrella for a variety of feminist, womanist, black, queer and other liberationist theologies. That being said, Jason Wyman accepts that the first generation of constructive theologians, whilst committed to social justice, found it difficult to live out inclusion in their practice.[54]

I acknowledge from the start that my own achievements in this dimension fall short of my aspirations. I am aware that my conversation partners are largely white, western and male, as are the majority of authors cited in my bibliography. That fact in itself leaves a number of very significant questions parked. It is important to acknowledge that skin, the primary organ of touch, is by no means politically neutral. There is little

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[51] Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology*, 110.

[52] Wyman, 'Constructive Theology: History, Movement, Method', 28.

[53] Marion Grau, 'Methodolical Themes and Patterns in Constructive Theologies' in *What is Constructive Theology?: Histories, Methodologies and Perspectives*, ed. by Marion Grau and Jason Wyman (London: T. and T. Clark, 2020), 58.

[54] Jason Wyman, 'Constructive Theology: History, Movement, Method', 26

reason to believe that the physiological experience of touch differs much with skin colour, but viewed through a political and cultural lens there is a world of difference located in what Toni Morrison has called "skin privilege".[55] This includes the experience of violence and exclusion, profoundly explored by theologians including James H. Cone, Anthony Pinn and Phylis Trible, and writers such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou.[56] It is also true that the digitisation of culture is likely to impact people from diverse racial backgrounds in radically different ways. I am conscious that there are significant facets to a theology of touch that remain unexplored in my work. I'm also cognisant of Mukti Barton, who says that

> One thing common to all theologies of liberation, such as Feminist theology and Black/Asian theology, is that in our biblical scholarship we do not believe in the myth of being objective, value-free and neutral. We unashamedly declare our subjectivity and often expose autobiographical elements to show how we are reading a particular biblical text.[57]

That being said, there is a political dimension to the exploration that follows. In the mode of constructive theology, I wish to ask 'In this new situation that is opened up, (in my case the onset of digital culture), what shall we do?' If the answers are incomplete, tentative and self-contradictory, I make no apology for the attempt.

What a constructive approach allows me to do is to draw on the widest range of disciplines to inform and interrogate a thesis about the meanings of touch. So within

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[55] '"I Regret Everything": Toni Morrison Looks Back On Her Personal Life', *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 20 April 2015, <www.npr.org/2016/01/22/463901896/i-regret-everything-toni-morrison-looks-back-on-her-personal-life> [Accessed 15 February 2025].

[56] Starting points for the consideration of a distinctively black theology of touch could include James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis, 1997), Anthony Pinn's *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, June 2010), Phylis Trible's *Texts of Terror* (London: SCM Press, 2003), and Anthony Reddie's *Black Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

[57] Mukti Barton, 'The Skin of Miriam Became as White as Snow: The Bible, Western Feminism and Colour Politics', in *Feminist Theology* 27 (2001), 69.

this work there is history, philosophy, theology, cultural studies, semiotics, physiology and Biblical studies. This is theology *à la carte.* One risk of such an eclectic approach is that I might end up with a study that is half a mile wide but half an inch deep, or worse, that I start from everywhere and end nowhere. The corresponding benefit is that I can engage in an interdisciplinary conversation, with lived experience, and with a humanist motivation. Constructive theology is a mode of practical theology. It is no coincidence that I am approaching the subject of touch in the context of my work with victims and survivors of physical and sexual abuse. That is not the topic of my thesis, but it is another area in need of urgent theological work, which I hope might be informed by this work.

Finally, constructive theology is a permission-giving mode of practice. Individual projects in constructive theology do not necessarily see themselves as contributing to a *summa*. As Wyman says, "Part of constructive theology's appeal and strength is that it doesn't pretend to offer exhaustive, finalized theologies."[58] Hence the 'Reaching for...' in my title. At its best there is a humility in constructive theology, and a self-consciously collaborative mode of enquiry. The reader is invited to join me in reaching for a theology of touch for a digital age.

8   Outline of this study

In order to consider the implications of machine synthesized touch, we need to consider what touch is, and also the role that it plays in an individual's understanding of their existence as an individual, and in relation to the world beyond the self. So in chapter two, Touching Some*thing,* I will explore what we mean when we speak about touch, and the role it plays in distinguishing self and other. I will note the difficulty of defining touch, and its place among the senses. Touch is a complex cultural phenomenon that it is not wholly captured by physiological accounts alone, nor by linguistic analogy. I will set out some of the philosophical heritage of thinking about

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[58] Jason Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology*, xiii.

touch, particularly the groundwork provided by Aristotle in *On The Soul* (De Anima) and *On Perception and Perceptible Objects* (De Sensu et Sensibilibus).[59] I will conclude, with Matthew Ratcliffe, that touch cannot be helpfully defined by except by convention.

I will go on to look at the phenomenology of touch in Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Taylor and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The twentieth century phenomenologists indicated that the sense of touch plays a key role in the experience of self and other, because it is in the unfolded distance between the self and the other, and more particularly in the impossibility of fully overcoming that distance, that an individual understands their embodied self to exist. In his later work Merleau-Ponty speaks about the uniqueness of touch in the inextricable 'entwinement' between one and other that is the essence of being in the flesh. He differs somewhat from the others in suggesting that touch is inevitably relational and therefore cultural, because the interpretation of touch is dependent on the individual schema, the cultural context that the individual brings to it. I will consider Merleau-Ponty's late work, which focused on what he called *chiasm* or 'folding back' — the almost mystical quality of one person meeting another, which he chooses to illustrate through the experience of hands touching and being touched. This section concludes with a brief excursus on pregnancy as an illustrative case of the strangeness of one person simultaneously touching and being touched by another, in which persons are both united and individuated.

In chapter three, Touching Some*one*, I will explore the role of touch in the cultural and theological constructions of inter-personal relationships, in conversation with the writings of Rowan Williams. Williams defines personhood in relational terms: we are, and become, authentically human in relation to the presence and meaning we have in the existence of others, and ultimately of God. The focal point for this relationality is

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[59] 'De Sensu et Sensibilibus' is one of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia*, a collection of short works discussing natural phenomena involving the body and the soul. It is sometimes rendered in English as 'Sense and Sensibilia'. In the Oxford World Classics edition which I will refer to, it is translated as 'On Perception and Perceptible Objects.'

the individual body experienced through consciousness and sense perception. It finds a particular expression in sex, which is a locus of 'the body's grace.'

Williams suggests that we are constituted as persons in our reception by other persons and by God: we discover *that* we are, and *who* we, are as we experience and respond to the desire of others and of God. Williams understands sex as a physical expression of this reciprocal desire. It is an act of mutual self-giving in which we discover ourselves to be desirable in the eyes of another, and in that experience find a revelation of God's own nature and God's desire for us. In this way, sex is analogous to, and derived from, the love of God in Christ. It is the embodiment of grace. Sex "involves a desire that one's partner be aroused by the recognition of one's desire that he or she be aroused".[60]

I will explore this further in chapter four. Whilst welcoming the essence of Williams' approach, I will suggest that it is unnecessarily ocularcentric. Ocularcentrism is a term coined by Martin Jay in his book *Downcast Eyes*.[61] Jay uses the term to critique the dominance of the visual in twentieth century philosophical discourse.

Williams describes our experience of this desire as being "held in a single gaze of love".[62] I will suggest that in a digital context, the idea of being touched and held by another (or by God) adds an important dimension to this. I will suggest a number of reasons why digitally synthesised touch — exemplified by purposive sexual engagement mediated via the internet — marks a significant turn that warrants a reassessment and reprioritisation of the theology of touch for the digital world.

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[60] Rowan Williams, 'The Body's Grace', in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* ed. by Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309–321.

[61] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[62] Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 2016), 28.

Williams has normally expressed this desire in terms of 'gaze'. It is possible that Williams has adopted what Paterson calls 'the forgetting of touch' in the rise of visual culture, which is "the historical bias toward the optic and ocularcentrism in Western cultural history, and a concomitant neglect of the haptic".[63] If so, this might have renewed significance in the understanding of human sex and sexuality, and increasingly so in the age of digital reproduction. Given Williams' emphasis on authenticity, I suggest that his understanding of the instantiation of the human *ousia* within the gaze of the other and of God could equally be expressed in haptic terms: 'I touch (and I desire to be touched) therefore I am.' I will argue that to construct it in haptic terms adds a further layer of significance.

In chapter five, Touching the Sacred, I will offer the idea that touch has qualities that could be described as sacramental. By that I mean that touch is a place of meeting between a human person and the world, or between a person and God, and that it becomes a potential locus of grace. I am using 'sacrament' here as a strong metaphor rather than a specifically religious construct. The sacramentality of touch is located in its signification, not merely in the brute fact of physical contiguity. Nevertheless, I will argue that when a person touches the world, something of significance may happen; and when a person touches another person, such significance is unavoidable. There is nothing mechanical or inevitable about this; touch becomes sacramental only if we choose to regard it as such. Therefore, we have choices to make about the values we attach to the mechanical representation of touch.

I will delineate five considerations that seem important in determining this significance. First, I will suggest that touch is essentially located. In other words, there is a meaning attached to contiguous contact in space and time that is not equal to the meaning of synthesised or purely analogous touch. Second, I will suggest that touch is essentially self-interpreted. In other words, I will argue (with Charles Taylor) that

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[63] Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 8.

human touch can have a meaning beyond its brute physiology, and that the particularity of that meaning is a matter of interpretation, exploration and gift. Third, and consequently, I will explore the significance of touch as a narrative sense. This narrativity is built into the physiology of touch. Touch is unique among the senses in that there are receptors dedicated to noticing the beginning and the end of the sensation. As a result, there is an eventedness about touching and being touched; every touch tells a story. Fourth, I will note that touch is a reflexive sense; touching and being touched are part of the same experience in a way that, say, seeing and being seen are not. It follows that touch is a relational sense, that plays a part not only in our being as persons, but also in our being in the world. Fifth, and consequently, I will suggest that human touch cannot be depoliticized, but has individual and corporate moral dimensions. For example, all human touch is inevitably gendered, whilst machine touch is not. There are significant implications for Christian theology, such as the transformation of the nature and meaning of violent and sexual touch. A theological ethic of touch oriented on the incarnation of Christ will reject over-simplified notions of purity and impurity in favour of generativity.

My purpose in delineating these aspects will be to create a framework against which we can measure some of the impact of the development of digital culture, and the new modes of relationship it makes possible through digitally mediated or synthesised touch.

In the following chapter I will ask how the Bible narrative illuminates theological understandings of touch. I will look at the developing understandings of touch in the Early Israel of the Old Testament, and its role in constituting the worshipping community. I will explore the very different understanding of touch evidenced by the accounts of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. I will also look at the distinct way that touch is presented in the gospel of John, and I will focus on the presentation of touch in the post-resurrection narratives, particularly the meetings between Christ and Mary, and between Christ and Thomas. I will suggest that Jesus embodied a transformation in the ways that touch is construed in relation to personhood in Christian theology, and that the post-resurrection understanding of touch forms the basis for a Christian theology. I

will suggest that in Christian thinking, touch constitutes the new eschatological community, the present and future body of Christ, in a way that is parallel to but different from the constitution of the community of Early Israel effected by the Levitical laws.

Chapter seven begins with an extended exploration of the meaning of analogy. What might we mean when we say that a human is 'like' a machine — especially when that analogy is applied to synthesized touch? I go on to explore the implications of the phenomenological and theological dimensions of touch for life and relationships in the digital world. I will ask whether, if you feel like you are being touch by a human, that is effectively the same as being touched by a human. What, if anything, is the categorical distinction between being touched by an embodied person, and being touched by a machine such as a teledildonic device that simulates human touch?

Chapter eight, Losing Touch?, returns to questions around the significance of digitally-synthesized or mediated touch. I will suggest that we need to pay attention to the ways in which digital culture offers to radically reconstruct the meanings of human touch, and consequently challenges central aspects of theological anthropology and sexual ethics such as gift, desire, sacrifice, gender and grace. The so-called 'collapse of context' — the compression of contextual information into decontextualized code — is accompanied by, or perhaps causes, the dissolution of boundaries, notably the boundaries between persons and things. This challenge to the integrity of edges in the understanding of the person and of the human body represents a significant challenge to conceptions of personhood. In particular, the collapse of context created by the digital mediation of information impacts the role of touch in the individual's self-perception as a corporeal unity and as a person-in-community, which in turn has an impact on cultural and theological understandings of intimate relationships.

The work of Rowan Williams gives me a framework in which to consider the implications of digital expressions of touch. Williams' understanding of the place of mutual desire in the realization of self implies that engagement with a machine (such as a computer) is categorically different from engagement with a person. Of course

you can have *something like* sex with *something like* a person. But to knowingly engage with a machine *as if* it were a person is to make a choice that is inauthentic, dehumanising and akin to idolatry.

The concluding chapter, *Finishing Touch*, expresses my thesis that personal touch is best understood in an eschatological context. Our own experience of touch as a language both graced and limited by time and space points to a greater reality. Efforts to replicate human touch mechanically or digitally as part of a post-human or trans-human project risk circumventing the sacramental character of touch in revealing the grace of God in our incarnate experience.

CHAPTER TWO

TOUCHING SOME*THING*

> Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body.[64]

> Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

The philosophy and phenomenology of touch

This chapter lays the groundwork for my study by surveying the philosophy of touch, particularly as it was understood by Aristotle, and the way in which touch falls within the taxonomy of senses. I go on to examine the part that touch plays in our experience of being persons in the world, looking at the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: his foundational *Phenomenology of Perception*, and the later development of his thought in relation to the boundaries between self and other. The chapter concludes with a brief excursus on the phenomenology of pregnancy, which I believe acts as a model for the common experience of holding and being held as a person in the world. These foundations will be useful when it comes to comparing the experience of plain touch with the touch of a machine.

1   The nature of touch

The active verb *to touch*, meaning 'to make deliberate physical contact', is evident in the English language from the late 13th century. Its origins are in the Old French *tochier*, meaning *to touch, hit, or knock*, and from the Vulgar Latin *toccare* meaning *to knock or strike* (as in a clapper striking a bell). The word quickly developed a wider

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[64] Jeannette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (New York: Vintage Canada and Penguin Random House, 2021), 89.

range of meanings associated with modes of human and other contact. By the fourteenth century there is evidence of *touch* being used to describe active investigation with the fingers, and around the same time it is used in a passive voice to describe simple contiguity of objects. Also at this early stage there is evidence of touch being used to describe emotional affects: hearts and minds being touched. The use of touch to refer to a contagious illness (e.g., *touched by the plague*) is first recorded in the 1660s. In this way the concept emerged as a description for non-physical contact that is analogous to contiguous physical touch. Its use to describe communication (being *in touch* or *out of touch*) dates from as recently as 1880. To touch someone, meaning *to borrow money*, is first recorded in 1760, and the first description of a willing lender as *a soft touch* dates from the 1940s. But of course, the exploration of the nature and meaning of physical contact is much older.

2   Aristotle and touch

Aristotle's *De Anima* is a philosophical consideration of the ontology of the human, emerging from his biological curiosity, and standing in contrast to Plato's reductionist view of the senses. Along with *De Sensu et Sensibilibus*, it has been influential in the categorisation and demarcation of the senses. In *De Anima* (and especially Book II, 11) Aristotle deals expressly with touch. He highlights a number of issues that will recur throughout this study: the role of touch among the senses, the reflexivity of touch, which creates ambiguity around touching and feeling, and the relationship between touch and the other senses, particularly sight. These set the context for a phenomenological analysis of touch — its role in a person's relationship with self, others, the world and potentially God.

Martha Nussbaum notes that irrespective of intentionality, Aristotle believes that "Any and every *psuchē* is logos *enhulos* realized in a physical body (*sōma*) of a certain kind, rather than in matter (*hulē*) as it might be described by a theoretical physicist".[65] It is

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[65] Martha Nussbaum, 'De Anima and its recent interpreters', in *Essays on Aristotle's De Anima*, ed. by Martha Nussbaum and Amelie O. Rorty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

the individual body, and particularly the activity of the body expressed through the senses, that actualises the soul. This specificity of embodied soul is central to Aristotle's understanding of the significance of the senses, and particularly of touch, which he develops in Book III of *De Anima*.

Writing around 350 BCE in *De Sensu et Sensibilibus*, Aristotle reports that Democritus and his followers are of the view that all the world is material. It is composed entirely of indivisible atoms, with only voids in between. Consequently, according to Democritus, all objects of sense are objects of touch, so that each of the other senses is effectively a mode of touch.[66] This early physicalism in some ways prefigures Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the perceiving body as the sole route to engage with the perceived world. Aristotle himself dismisses Democritus' thought as irrational, conceding only that taste and touch are related as they share the necessity for contact.[67] Nevertheless, whilst soul is the *sine qua non* of personhood, Aristotle generally speaks of touch as its unifying factor. Massie believes that Aristotle sees it as the "commonest and lowest power […] possessed by all sentient being".[68] Aristotle delineates a hierarchy of the senses, with touch as the baseline sense, separate from but interdependent upon sentience, and without which there can be no existence.

> If an animal is an animate body, and every body is tangible, and what is perceptible by touch is tangible, then the animal's body is necessarily also capable of touch, if the animal is going to be preserved. For the other senses, such as smell, sight and hearing, perceive through other things; but if, when the animal touches anything, it does not possess

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[66] Aristotle, 'On Perception and Perceptible Objects' 442a–b in *On the Soul and Other Psychological Works,* trans. by Fred D. Miller Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 80.

[67] Aristotle, 'On Perception' 442b, 80.

[68] Pascal Massie, 'Touching, Thinking, Being: The Sense of Touch in Aristotle's *De Anima* and Its Implications', *Minerva,* 17 (2013), 74.

perception, it will be unable to avoid some things and grasp others. If this is the case, it will not be possible for the animal to be preserved.[69]

In other words, touch may exist in the absence of one or more of the other senses, but without touch there is no life. It is at once the most basic sense, and at the same time the most important.

It is worth noting that Aristotle is not entirely consistent in this. In *De Generatione et Corruptione* (On Generation and Corruption), whilst he explains that the primary contrarieties of bodies, such as hot and cold, dry and wet, are properly known by touch, he maintains that: "vision is prior [*proteron*] to touch".[70] However, his normal position is that touch is the baseline sense because "it is by touch that all the characteristics of the tangible object, in so far as it is tangible, are perceptible to us".[71] Touch, then, is the crudest sense and the one most liable to baseness.

Aristotle sees touch as unique amongst the senses in other ways too. The other senses — sight, hearing, taste and smell — are all mediated though air or through water. In a sense, the perceptions they produce are analogies for reality, since there is an intermediary between object and subject. Touch alone, he says, allows the direct perception of reality, and so discloses an object in its truth, because touch enables us to sense an object and its being simultaneously. The other senses require intellectual interpretation. So, for instance, the sense of hearing cannot itself tell whether an object is loud or quiet, but is dependent on the intellect for construal. In contrast, Aristotle believes, touch allows us to sense the existence of an object directly, the

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[69] Aristotle, 'On the Soul', Book III, Part 12, 434b in *On the Soul and Other Psychological Works*, 67.

[70] Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption* 329b, trans. by H. H. Joachim, (eBooks@Adelaide, 2007), 2.2 < https://web.archive.org/web/20080823060726/ http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/corruption/complete.html> [accessed 9 April 2024].

[71] Aristotle, 'On the Soul', Book III, 425a, 47.

perception and interpretation of its presence being identical. He describes himself as 'puzzled' as to whether there is a single organ of touch, or multiple organs collecting varieties of information such as heat, wetness and hardness.[72] As we have seen in the brief note of physiology above, he was correct to identify this complexity. Touch is different from the other senses in a number of ways. The other senses detect only one 'contrariety'. Where other senses may be mediated, touch requires material co-presence. There is absolute reciprocity in touch, a simultaneity of subject and object, yet without the subject and object becoming an ontological unity. As Massie puts it, "if an object touches me, I experience not only the object but also at once and together my flesh being touched by the object".[73] We cannot know what Aristotle might have made of a context in which touch is digitally mediated, and therefore effectively intangible.

It is in this way, using the sense of touch, that Aristotle believes humans and animals distinguish what is themselves from what is not. The sense of touch occurs at the threshold of the distinction between interior and exterior. So foundational is this distinction that Massie understands Aristotle to be saying that

> Touch is co-extensive with animal life; it emerges and vanishes with it. An animal endowed with other sense organs can remain alive even if it loses hearing, taste, smell, or sight, but the loss of tactility is its death.[74]

Aristotle further distinguishes between touch and simply being in contact. For example, a lower order creature such as a tree must be in contact with the soil to live, but the relationship between the two, through which the tree receives its nourishment, is purely mechanical. The difference between touch and mere contact is defined by sensation and intentionality.[75] As Massie writes,

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[72] Aristotle, 'On the Soul', Book II, 422b, 42.

[73] Massie, 'Touch in Aristotle's De Anima', 82.

[74] Massie, 'Touch in Aristotle's De Anima', 78–9.

[75] Aristotle, 'On the Soul', Book II, 414a, 25.

> The roots of a plant are in contact with the nutrients of the soil just as a book is in contact with the table on which it rests; this simply means that there is no third body between their extremities. Yet, neither the book nor the plant touches what they are in contact with. A plant is capable of nourishing itself, but it does so mechanically, without desiring food, for where there is no perception there is no desire.[76]

Whilst Aristotle is clear about the organs responsible for the senses of sight, smell and hearing, he is less definitive about the organ of touch. Unlike the other senses, touch occurs all over the body; it is a property of flesh as a whole. If there is an organ of touch, he says, it is the heart.[77] The skin clearly has a role, although the sense of touch appears instantaneous even when the skin is covered by another material. He contemplates the role of the flesh, or some inner organ such as the heart. He explores the idea that unlike the other sensory organs, the skin is changed by the experience of touch; when skin touches something hot, it becomes hot, and so on. It is this factor that makes humans superior to animals, who rely on fur, claws or whiskers as organs.

In the end, instead of resolving the question of what is the organ of touch, Aristotle takes a psychosomatic, almost metaphysical approach. It is as if there is not a particular organ, but the being itself, and particularly the intellect, that mediates touch. The sensitivity of human touch renders humans superior to animals, and further, degrees of sensitivity of touch are responsible for the quality of intellect.

> The human being is left behind by many of the animals [in that there are many species that have better eyesight, hearing or sense of smell than humans], but with respect to touch he is precise in a way that greatly surpasses the rest, and that is why he is the most intelligent of animals.[78]

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[76] Massie, 'Touch in Aristotle's De Anima', 78.

[77] Aristotle, 'On Perception', 439a, 74.

[78] Aristotle, 'On The Soul', Book II, 421a, 39.

As always for Aristotle, the moderation of the tempers is necessary for the preservation of the sense organs and of the whole creature.

> Excess in tangible objects, for example hot, cold, or hard - is fatal to the animal. For the excess of any perceptible object is fatal to the sense-organ, so that a tangible object also destroys touch; and it is by this sense that an animal was distinguished, for it has been shown that an animal cannot exist without touch. That is why excess in tangible objects destroys not only the sense-organ, but also the animal, because this is the only sense which it must possess.[79]

The ability of humans to separate the sense of touch from the automatic demands of appetite in matters such as hunger and sexual desire marks humans out from lower orders of creation. As Freedland puts it,

> From [Aristotle's] standpoint humans may not exactly be living in a different perceptible world from that of other animals, but […] they experience the same world of perceptible objects in clearer, less subjectively loaded ways. We can classify things and regard them as pleasant in and of themselves, not merely in relation to us.[80]

If touch is the only sense that is wholly necessary for existence, it is the intersection of touch with the other senses that provides context, which is vital to practical survival. It is the cross-referencing effect of multiple senses working together that guarantees that any sensation happens at a particular place and moment in time. "It is clear […] that it is not possible to discriminate separate objects by means of separate things; and that it is also not possible to do so at separate times."[81] This essential coincidence of touching and perceiving, of the thing and its presence in space and time, will be the very thing that is most radically challenged by digital mediation.

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[79] Aristotle, 'On The Soul', Book III, 435b, 69.

[80] Cynthia Freedland, 'Aristotle on the Sense of Touch', in *Essays,* ed. by Nussbaum and Rorty, 242.

[81] Aristotle, 'On The Soul', Book III, 426b, 50.

Such is the primacy of touch in Aristotle's thought that he sees touch as immediately connected to intellect, so that "The intelligible becomes intelligent by touching and thinking".[82] Indeed he attributes the differences between the intellect of one man and another solely to sensitivity of touch.

> Members of the human race are well or ill-suited owing to this sense but not any other; for humans with hard flesh are ill suited for cognitive activity, while those with soft flesh are well suited.[83]

In other words, intellectual ability is directly correlative to sensitivity of touch.

3   Touch in the Western tradition

It is beyond the scope of this project to describe the whole subsequent development of the philosophy of touch, but some thinkers deserve brief mention by virtue of their agreement or disagreement with Aristotle. Lucretius, for example, rejected Aristotle's idea of the soul for a far more mechanistic understanding of touch. In Book 2 of *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things)[84] he suggested that nothing can exist that is not a body. Nothing exists except atoms and void, void itself being not a thing, but an absence of any thing. It follows, for Lucretius, that every sensation is actually touch, and everything we sense, we sense through the touch of atoms. All differences of sensation are the result of our bodies being touched by different types of atom.

For example, honey tastes good, because the particles that constitute honey are round and smooth. Wormwood tastes bitter, because it is made up of hooked particles that cut the sense organs. Wine produces a tingling sensation that is neither sweet nor bitter, because wine atoms are made up of tiny spikes.

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[82] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library 1072b (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1935), 20–21.

[83] Aristotle, 'On The Soul', Book III, 421a, 39.

[84] Lucretius, *De rerum natura* [On the Nature of Things], trans. by W. H. D. Rouse (London: Heinemann, 1924).

Gregory of Nyssa was one of the four great fathers of the Eastern church. He understood the sense of touch as one of the means by which the mind apprehends the world. Gregory shared with Aristotle the belief that the hands in particular are indicators of the rationality of humankind.

> For this reason the hands were attached to the body; for though we can count up very many uses in daily life for which these skilfully contrived and helpful instruments, our hands, that easily follow every art and every operation, alike in war and peace, are serviceable, yet nature added them to our body pre-eminently for the sake of reason.[85]

Sarah Coakley points out[86] that in his later writings (e.g., his *Life of Moses*), Gregory took an apophatic turn, from Platonic reason to desire, understanding the senses as characteristics shared by God, but superseded by him. For this reason, Gregory wrote, humans should never be content with what is available to the senses, because never to reach satiety of desiring is truly to see God.

Augustine, somewhat like Aristotle, believed in the perfect unity of soul and body, but also that the self could only be known as it was revealed by God. This led to a high view of the senses in the constitution of personhood, for as he emphasised in *On Care to be Had for the Dead*,[87] the body must be honoured because it belongs to the very nature of the person. However, the body is also a prison, and the senses are gateways for vice. Later, Augustine moved (e.g., in *De Trinitatae*) toward a contemplative and sensual vision of incorporation into the divine.

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[85] Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Making of Man', VIII:8 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 5,* ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1974), 394.

[86] Sarah Coakley, 'Introduction - Gender, Trinitarian Analogies, and the Pedagogy of *The Song*' in *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. by Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

[87] Augustine, 'On Care To Be Had For The Dead', trans. by H. Browne, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* ed. by Schaff and Wace, 539–551.

In the Middle Ages, Classen suggests, information was generally transmitted through the medium of the human body.[88] The social bond served for protection, and it was expressed in common eating, bathing and sleeping, and in hugging, kissing, and holding hands. Skin-to-skin hand-holding was used to signify the sealing of contracts. Even today, almost every culture seals contracts with some form of touch, from shaking hands to rubbing noses or touching foreheads. Understandably, medieval cosmology was framed in sensory terms. Such was the tactility of devotion that it could verge on the erotic. The abbot and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux wrote

> In your beauty you will touch my beauty all the more worthily, with greater felicity. You will touch me with the hand of faith, the finger of desire, the embrace of love; you will touch me with the mind's eye[89]

while John of the Cross wrote

> Oh, soft hand! Oh, delicate touch. Oh, hand, as generous as thou art powerful and rich, richly and powerfully dost thou give me thy gifts! Oh, soft hand, the softer for this soul, and softly laid upon it, for if thou wert to lean hardly upon it the whole world would perish.[90]

In the medieval church, touch and gesture became intrinsic to the enactment of piety. In the same period the cult of relics made physical proximity to the body parts of saints and holy people into an act of grace. Eucharistic elements were a special case of the physical transmission of grace. Lay people might bake the bread for the Eucharist, but only priests touched the consecrated host until it was received physically into the body of the communicant.

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[88] Constance Classen, 'A Place by the Fire', in Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1–26.

[89] Bernard of Clairvaux, 'Through the Streets and Squares I Will Seek Him Whom My Soul Loves', in *Sermons on the Song of Songs,* vol. 4 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 10.

[90] John of the Cross, 'Living Flame of Love', in *The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1935), 42.

Not surprisingly, Aquinas dealt with touch as both a physical and a moral sense. It had a special significance, because it was distributed throughout the body (with a separate focus on taste, which he, following Aristotle, saw as a subsection of touch). He regarded the virtue of temperance as specifically related to restraining the sense of touch, the most difficult of the passions to curb. The tangibility of Christ's body both before and after the resurrection was a mark of his sinless humanity. After the Resurrection it was "shown to be of the same nature, but of different glory".[91] Aquinas, like Aristotle, believed that "Among men it is in virtue of fineness of touch, and not of any other sense, that we discriminate the mentally gifted from the rest."[92]

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a developing tension in the status of touch. Joe Moshenska argues that some of the central debates of this period, around the nature of human experience, of the material world, and of the relationship between the human and the divine, were worked out in relation to touch. From being understood as the most reliable and essential of senses, touch was also seen as "dangerously bodily, and too fully involved in sensual and sexual pleasures to be of true worth".[93]

4   Touch among the senses

In a rather grandiose and somewhat Aristotelian statement, Ashley Montagu writes that

> Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose and mouth. It is the sense which became differentiated into them, a fact that seems to be

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[91] Thomas Aquinas, *p*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1912), Part 3, question 54, article 2, reply obj. 2, 393.

[92] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, xi.

[93] Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), dust jacket.

recognized in the age-old evaluation of touch as 'the mother of the senses'.[94]

In practice, the enumeration and distinction of the senses has long been a matter for discussion for both physiologists and philosophers. For example, in the light of the physiological complexity outlined above, it makes sense to palaeobiologist Nina Jablonski to count the receptors responding to warmth, pain and pressure separately, and to place them in a much longer list of senses.[95]

In 1966 the linguistic philosopher Paul Grice extended Aristotle's model of organ, object and medium,[96] proposing four possible criteria by which senses might be individuated.[97] If applied to the sense of touch, those four criteria would be:

i) what we are aware of via the sense — i.e., the sense of touch gives us an awareness of the heat, cold, roughness, smoothness etc. of things;

ii) the quality of the sensory experience — i.e., what the object 'feels like' to the subject;

iii) the sensory stimulus — i.e., touch is stimulated by physical contact, as sight is stimulated by light waves meeting the retina, and hearing is stimulated by sound waves meeting the ear drum;

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[94] Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, 3rd edn. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 3.

[95] Nina Jablonski, *Skin: A Natural History* (London: University of California Press, 2006), 97.

[96] Aristotle's understanding is set out in *De Anima*, Book 3, chapter 1.
trans. by H. Lawson-Tancred, Penguin Classics (London, Penguin, 1986), 189 ff.

[97] The following summary of the four criteria is to be found in H. Paul Grice, 'Some Remarks about the Senses,' in *Analytical Philosophy: First Series*, ed. by R. J. Butler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962); repr. in *The Senses: Classic and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. F. Macpherson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 85.

iv) the physiology of the sense organs and their connection to the brain.

It is not clear that any of these criteria can be said to operate independently, or that they absolutely distinguish touch from the other senses. Grice's criteria raise a range of phenomenological questions, in particular whether it is possible to delineate the experience of the subject (as in Grice's first criterion) from the distinctive thing that is perceived (his second criterion). It is also unclear where the balance of physiology and psychology lies in the nature of touch, as with other senses. The issue is complicated by the fact that there is no single organ of touch. Even the skin includes a heterogeneous range of receptors, and it is arguable that the brain is the organ of touch *and* of all the other senses. Touch is a difficult sense to get hold of.

Perhaps the most that can be said for now is that touch involves a *sense* of connection with the other. Hence, Mark Paterson concludes that

> Physiologically, touch is a modality resulting from the combined information of innumerable receptors and nerve endings concerned with pressure, temperature, pain and movement. But there is more to touch. It is a sense of communication. It is receptive, expressive, can communicate empathy. It can bring distant objects and people into proximity.[98]

Matthew Ratcliffe agrees, urging us to embrace the complexity of touch, because "touch can involve a broad spectrum of contents, ranging from vaguely localised bodily sensations to recognition of something as a specific kind of object".[99] He argues that tactual perception in humans encompasses a complex range of diverse experiences and functions, and that it is overly simplistic even to refer to it as one sense amongst others. Instead, the perception of touch derives from a range of stimuli and performs a range of functions. Touch is neither directly correlated with object recognition, nor

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[98] Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1.

[99] Ratcliffe, 'What Is Touch?', 414.

completely divorced from it. It makes sense only when the physiological data are experienced in a relational and cultural context. For example, you may still be able to determine whether your hand has been shaken in a friendly or angry manner, even if your eyes are closed. If you are beaten with a cane or caressed with a feather, the intention may well be communicated, even if you are deprived of all of the other senses. Studies have shown that humans can communicate emotions such as compassion, fear, gratitude, anger and love with greater than 50% accuracy using touch alone.[100] When you feel a ball without seeing it, you don't only feel a collection of pressure signals — you may well also recognise it as a ball. If you add sight or sound to the touch experience, the communication of meaning and intentionality becomes richer, but even by itself, touch communicates far more than the receptors alone can sense.

Of course, on one level, there *are* only sense receptors responding to stimulation, and no doubt it is only the present limits of technology that hold us back from mechanically replicating that stimulation, or its reception, or both. And yet at another level, we know that we can give a much richer account of the experience and the meaning of touch. The mind is more than the brain, and the experience of touch is more than the mechanistic firing of sensory receptors.

In his attempt to define touch, Matthew Ratcliffe concludes that it cannot be fully categorised by any singular set of criteria, but only by convention. There is a range of stimuli associated with it, including pressure, heat, wetness and so on. There is also a range of social and cultural functions including mark-making, sex, friendship and some rather quirky functions such as tickling and being tickled. Ratcliffe concludes that touch is "a heterogeneous assortment of variably integrated perceptual achievements" and "no phenomenological or non-phenomenological characteristics

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[100] Matthew J. Hertenstein, Rachel Holmes, Margaret McCullough, and Dacher Keltner, 'The Communication of Emotion via Touch', *Emotion,* 9:4 (2009), 566–73.

serve to characterise them all, while excluding all other kinds of perception".[101] All in all, the meanings of touch are, well, slippery. They are multiple, complex and intertwining. But rather than treat these ambiguities as a puzzle to be solved, the work of theology requires us to celebrate their richness and complexity, as we shall see in the next chapter.

5   Tactility and the awareness of the other

The question of how we know what we know was central to the French phenomenologists of the first half of the twentieth century, as they sought a way of understanding the mode of relations by which a self apprehends an other. Of course, they were writing at a time when mechanical reproduction of images at scale and in detail was relatively new. Their thinking, and particularly the focus of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the place of touch in human self-understanding, will help to illuminate our thinking about the status of digital reproduction.

Merleau-Ponty's central original idea was that perception is not just contingently but essentially a bodily phenomenon. He emphasised the body (*le corps propre*) as the primary site of knowing the world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he wrote that "I understand the other person through my body, just as I perceive 'things' through my body,"[102] and, elsewhere, that "perception is not born just anywhere" but "emerges in the recesses of a body".[103] Perception is rooted in our bodiliness — and touch is a primary vehicle of perception. With this move to situate subjectivity in the lived body, Merleau-Ponty entirely jeopardises the dualism of Cartesian metaphysics. Our view is not from nowhere, but from somewhere — that somewhere being *here*. And whilst

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[101] Ratcliffe, 'What Is Touch?', 431.

[102] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2014), 191–2.

[103] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 9.

our perception is inevitably flawed it is not meaningless or fantastical but real. Consequently, the distinction between what is real and what is not is both essential and uniquely available to humans.[104]

Merleau-Ponty was raised in a Roman Catholic family, but left the church in his mid-20s over its refusal to embrace socialist politics. Some see a latent theology in his phenomenology, though Jack Williams argues that his phenomenological thinking was rigorously earthbound. However, Jack Williams does see in Merleau-Ponty an explanation of the human search for an affective and embodied experience that could be described as religious.[105] Merleau-Ponty certainly believed that human existence is different from all other existence, because it involves inhabiting our environment affectively and intelligently. "Perception is not a private mental state, nor is the body just one more physical event among others."[106]

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty set out to reject what he saw as two inadequate propositions regarding human essence: the notion of disembodied, purely instinctual existence, and the notion of absolute physicalism. Sartre's rationalist cognitivism, set out in *Being and Nothingness*,[107] claimed that thinking alone constitutes our relationship with the world, though it failed to answer what kind of thinking could produce this reductive physicalism. Merleau-Ponty's alternative was the bodily point of view. The individual body is the subject, and I reach out to the world through my own awareness of it. It doesn't make sense to ask why I am aware of

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[104] A question arises as to how much of this embodied self-awareness is available to other living creatures, and especially to the 'higher' animals. To what extent to non-human animals share in the *imago Dei*? These questions are important, but for the present exercise they are secondary.

[105] Jack Williams, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion', *Religious Studies,* 57 (2021), 634–653.

[106] Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 76.

[107] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 1995).

myself. Consciousness is located in the body — because where else could it be located? — and the view from here is not just one more arbitrary perspective on the world but "my point of view upon the world".[108] Merleau-Ponty thought that all perception was encarnated in the senses. Contrary to Kant, he believed that it is the body as a whole, and not just the mind, that understands.

Merleau-Ponty maintained that the body and that which it perceived could not be disentangled from each other, but were in effect reaching out to find themselves in each other. Early Merleau-Ponty (e.g., his *Phenomenology of Perception*) emphasised the deep difference in principle between the self and the environment.

> I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, inspect them, and walk around them. But when it comes to my body, I never observe it itself. I would need a second body to be able to do so, which would itself be unobservable.[109]

We are open to the world — but we are also embedded in the world. We are very close to things, but also irredeemably distant. What, then, does it mean to touch something? This was a particular problem for Merleau-Ponty, since touch would seem to be the one sense that overcomes the distance between subject and object.

For Merleau-Ponty, "perception and embodiment […] are not mere *properties* of minds or subjects, but constitutive elements of our *being in the world*".[110] Where an early modern philosopher such as Descartes tended to conceive of attention as the possession of a set of ideas,[111] Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was an attempt to

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[108] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 73.

[109] Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 93.

[110] Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 33.

[111] René Descartes, 'Replies to Objections', in *The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes* (3 volumes), trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309.

free perception from this semantic-representational paradigm by insisting on the literal correctness of our naïve understanding of intentionality. Phenomenology calls us to return, as Husserl frequently put it, to the things themselves (*die unmittelbaren Gegebenheiten*).[112] Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not a theory of mental representation, but a descriptive account of perception as a mode of being in the world. Deliberate attention can only be focused on or aimed at something.

Charles Taylor enters a caveat that it is possible to pay attention to an emotion such as fear, even when that fear relates to something that doesn't physically exist. His example is a panic-inducing nightmare about being gored by a tiger. Even if you are afraid of something that doesn't actually exist, your sensation is related to something — and that something is the fear of what might be. In the same way, you cannot touch nothing. Even if you think you are touching something that doesn't in fact exist, the sensation that you have or imagine is itself the object of your touch. It is a matter of non-indifference. There can be no irrational pain, for instance, because if an individual experiences a sensation as painful, it is painful to them. If a person is experiencing a feeling, they are feeling it, even if that feeling is not generated by what they think they are feeling — or by any objective thing at all. The experience of feeling is none the less real and meaningful. Whether physical or not, without the thingness of the thing, what Taylor calls "brute data",[113] the idea makes no sense.

Husserl suggested that physical objects have a particular claim to objectivity because they have their own "inner horizons"[114] — hidden aspects such as the view from the reverse or the sides, or other characteristics which I have not yet perceived. Merleau-Ponty took this a step further. An object has its objectivity, not just because I can

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[112] Edmund Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, Zweite Auflage (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1965), 11.

[113] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 19.

[114] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian meditations: An introduction to phenomenology*, trans. by D. Cairns, (Dordrecht: Springer, 1960), 44, and in many other places.

theoretically imagine that it has hidden characteristics such as a reverse view, but because I already *do* imagine it. I cannot do otherwise, because "all sensoriality presupposes a certain field".[115] I have never seen the reverse side of the Mona Lisa, because it is firmly fixed to a wall in The Louvre. According to Sartre's understanding, this would imply that the Mona Lisa cannot meaningfully be said to have a reverse side. Husserl sees this as a nonsense, knowing full well that the Mona Lisa has a reverse side, even if he has never and will never see it, because it is screwed to the wall. Merleau-Ponty not only believes that the Mona Lisa has a reverse side, but can imagine what it probably looks like, at least by reference to other paintings whose reverse sides he *has* seen.

If I look at a Greek sculpture, I necessarily do so from a particular standpoint. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty agree we can know that the sculpture has a back as well as a front. We know that it is theoretically tangible. Merleau-Ponty argues that we can only grasp the objective thingness of the sculpture because we can (potentially at least) walk around it. The sculpture has dimensions, and it has history. It exists in space and time. Our experience of it has an irreducible first person character,[116] but that does not in any way diminish its objective reality. Our immersion in our environment, our being in the world, renders impossible any reference to consciousness or subjectivity as an isolated or self-sufficient sphere or region of being. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is an externalism grounded in the idea that the structure of perception just *is* the body's concretely situated practical engagement with the world.

Such discussions about the reverse of the Mona Lisa or the back of a Greek sculpture make sense when we construct the experience primarily as a visual one. But the sense of touch moves the discussion onwards. Perhaps I can reach round and touch the back of the sculpture, even if I can't see it. But if I do so, the distance between my self and the object disappears. I can touch the back of my head, even though I can never see it.

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[115] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 230.

[116] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 92.

I can be certain that my head has a back, not only because everyone else's head appears to have a back, but also because I can confirm this by touching it with my own hand.

It is partly because of the puzzle presented by the sense of touch that in his later work, Merleau-Ponty began to question (in an echo of Democritus) whether there is a true boundary between the body and the universe at all. He began to see the two as not simply entangled, but actually one continuous essence, so that the surrounding physical world is an active participant in our perceptual experience. Where his earlier thought in *Phenomenology of Perception* had focussed on a radically incarnate understanding of awareness and intelligence, his later, posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible* prefigured James Lovelock's 'Gaia Hypothesis' in understanding the world itself as a self-creative and intelligent (though not conscious) entity. In place of referring to the human body as the locus of perception, he began to write more often of this collective "flesh of the world", his term for the animate, sensate essence of the universe of which our own sentient bodies are but a part. He appears to have been moving towards understanding perception as a continuous and unmediated conversation between the flesh of the agent and the vast and undifferentiated cosmos that encompasses us.[117]

The Visible and the Invisible was incomplete at Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961. His aim appears to have been to bind together the subjective and objective experiences of embodiedness through a new concept which he called 'chiasm' or crossing-over (after the Greek letter *chi*). He returned to Husserl's image of one hand touching another, which he had discussed in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In that book he wrote that

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[117] In notes written in November 1960 Merleau-Ponty wrote "Start from this: there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another." Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 264.

Again, in May 1960 he wrote "my body is made of the same flesh as the world...and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world." Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 248.

When I press my two hands together, it is not a question of two sensations that I could feel together, as when we perceive two objects juxtaposed, but rather of an ambiguous organization where the two hands can alternate between the functions of 'touching' and 'being touched'.[118]

In his early work he was sure that the sensations of touching and being touched could not be understood simultaneously. The sensations alternated, albeit immensely quickly so that difference was imperceptible. Later, though, he qualified his earlier position that gave priority to the felt phenomenon over the objective body. He came to regard touching and being touched as two dimensions of a single phenomenon, and this phenomenon as simultaneous and separate, yet at the same moment inextricably combined with all the other senses.

Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world […] There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and the tangible in the visible: the two maps are complete, and they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable.[119]

The distance between the body and the world is disappearing here. The body is 'sensible in itself'.

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only 'shadows stuffed with organs,' that is, more of the visible?[120]

In this late work, around the idea of *chiasm* or 'folding back', Merleau-Ponty was reaching for an almost mystical explanation of the standing of the person in the world, which is nevertheless wholly grounded in space and time.

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[118] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 95.

[119] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

[120] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

> The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being. Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to location and to the now. Much more, the inauguration of the where and the when, the possibility and exigency for the fact; in a word: facticity, what makes the fact be a fact. And, at the same time, what makes the facts have meaning, makes the fragmentary facts dispose themselves about 'something'.[121]

Merleau-Ponty is straining towards an understanding that human experience is continuous with the physical life of the world, and that the rootedness of that experience in space and time is all that secures its facticity. The implication is that sensation precedes intersubjective relations. The sensation forms the subject, and the notion of any sensation that is not rooted in a specific *where* and *when* quite literally makes no sense. In this, Merleau-Ponty drew on the seventeenth century French Catholic priest and rationalist philosopher Nicholas Malebranche who wrote "I can only feel that which touches me".[122] Merleau-Ponty cites these words to argue that the 'I' who feels exists only because it is a subject of the touch. The formation of the feeling self is a consequence of the touch. A person who cannot be touched has no feeling; and a person with no feeling is not a person. It follows, according to Judith Butler, that

> If I can only feel what touches me, that means there is a restriction on what I can feel. Many consequences follow from this claim: I cannot feel if nothing touches me, and the only thing I can feel is that which touches me. I must be touched to feel, and if I am not touched, then I will not feel. If I will not feel, then there is no way to report on what I feel [...][123]

...and so on.

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[121] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

[122] The sentence from Malebranche's 'Meditations Chretiennes et Metaphysiques' originally reads, "Il est necessaire que je ne me sente qu'en moi-meme, lorsqu'on me touche." It is quoted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Incarnate Subject: Malebranche, Biran, and Bergson on the Union of Body and Soul* (Seattle: Prometheus Books, 2001), 43.

[123] Judith Butler, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche' in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty,* ed. by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 188.

All of this does not, and could not, offer a commentary on the significance of being touched by a machine, or by an object that purports to be personal when it is not. But it certainly raises the stakes. If I am constituted by the experience of being touched, then it matters rather a lot who or what I am being touched by.

In his later work, Merleau-Ponty was perhaps responding to some of the problems that were identified at the beginnings of first-wave feminism, which had begun to question whether the role of experience in knowledge was overly influenced by patriarchal norms. As Elizabeth Grosz wrote,

> Experience cannot be understood as the unproblematic criterion for the assessment of knowledges, for it is clearly implicated in the dominant cultural and theoretical terms through which it is produced and by which it is framed. With the onslaught of anti-humanism, Marxism and poststructuralism in the late 1970s and 1980s, experience tended to become something of a dirty word, at least in some feminist circles.[124]

In other words, if our understanding of reality is made up of perceptual experience, interpreted through a cultural lens, we need to ask who has provided the lens. Merleau-Ponty was increasingly sensitive to these challenges. Clearly this question takes on a hugely practical importance when it comes to the interpretation of touch. If touch (like the other senses) can only be understood through the schema of cultural experiences and expectations, then its interpretation can only be subjective. What influences come to bear, and what choices are made, in the development of this schema in the individual or in society? Who is entitled to say what a particular sort of touch means?

As his thinking developed, the business of representation, especially through painting, was increasingly important to Merleau-Ponty as a lived metaphor for the location of information. Although Merleau-Ponty was working this out through the analogue

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[124] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh,' *Thesis Eleven,* 36 (1993), 40.

medium of largely two-dimensional painting, in a digital age we need to ask similar questions about representation in digital and three-dimensional forms. In his 1952 essay *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*[125] (which he dedicated to his friend Sartre), he insisted that an individual work of art cannot be fully apprehended by the viewer as if its existence in space and time did not matter. Rather, it is a vehicle through which the artist speaks in a unique and reflexive language. Consequently, a work of art that is reproduced or counterfeited, however accurately, cannot bear the same meaning as the 'original'. Nor will the painting carry the same meaning when it is hung in a gallery or museum. Indeed, he saw exhibition as a kind of theft from the artist. The counterfeiter and the museum have their own language, attached to their own context, that radically changes the information spoken by the painting. To fully understand what an artist is saying in creating a work of art, we would have to be with them in the studio, smelling the paint on the palette and watching the anguish involved in the act of painting. Even then, both artist and viewer would be left with the frustration of incompleteness and inadequacy in being able to write and read the truth. Presented with a meeting conducted virtually, Merleau-Ponty might feel the same frustration he felt in visiting a gallery:

> That something has been lost […] that so many joys, so much anger and so many labors were not destined one day to reflect the museum's mournful light.[126]

Merleau-Ponty yearned for a return to naïveté, which he saw as the appropriate and truthful organising principle of our lives. 'I perceive that a thing is so, because it is so.' This puts Merleau-Ponty at odds with many later thinkers on consciousness, such as Daniel Dennett, who is a vocal critic of the first-person nature of classical

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[125] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader,* ed. by Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 77–120.

[126] Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 99.

phenomenology.[127] For Dennett, there is fundamentally no difference between what one perceives as an experience and the judgement one makes about that experience. There is no possible distinction between seeing a work of art and understanding it. For him, quite literally, seeing is believing. For Merleau-Ponty, ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sensing and judging. It understands judgement to be a position-taking. What intellectualist theorists of perception such as Sartre and later Dennett fail to acknowledge[128], according to Merleau-Ponty, is the embodiment and situatedness of experience. "Perception is not an act of the understanding."[129]

This project of making sense of the other as objective reality required Merleau-Ponty to give an account of the senses, and the way that they receive, process and interpret information. He rejected the assumption of philosophers such as Aristotle that the five human senses are discrete, and that the problem is to make sense of their unity. Instead he regarded the senses as interconnected, and working in a unity to produce a single bodily perception. It would not be possible wholly to separate the sight or taste of anchovies from the feel or smell of them. Instead, the perceiving body perceives them as a whole. Experience is essentially multisensory. "The senses communicate in perception just as the two eyes collaborate in vision."[130] It's not even clear where one sense ends and another begins. For example, no single sense is responsible for proprioception, my sense of myself, including how and where I am located. Rather than delineating a further sense or combination of senses to account for this, Merleau-Ponty saw perception as an undifferentiated experience, in which sensations are merged, embedded and inseparable in the overall experience of the other. This collaborative overlap between the senses comes to us not as an intellectual analogy, but a lived reality. This is graphically illustrated by the experience of synæsthesia, the

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[127] For example, in *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, MA: Little and Brown, 1991).

[128] This critique is outlined in Daniel Zahavi, 'Killing the straw man: Dennett and phenomenology', *Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2007), 21–43 (p. 32).

[129] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 47.

[130] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 243.undifferentiated

neurological phenomenon whereby a particular sensory stimulus triggers a second kind of sensation.[131] The plurality and interconnectedness of senses, like the plurality of persons, may be mysterious, he said, but it is undeniable.

> Distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of a science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses. The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the centre from which these contributions radiate.[132]

Unlike the existentialists, Merleau-Ponty did not believe that every thing that was apprehended had only the validity of the moment in which it was experienced. Instead, he wrote that all perception has the dual structure of figure and ground (or object and background/context). The body 'understands' the world, and is able to predict and structure our awareness of objects within it, as a result of what he called its habit or schema. This schema is culturally relative, and is learned and developed over time, first by babies repeating and interpreting experiences, and then by adults developing a reflexive sense of the meaning of their contact with the world, and therefore the meaning of themselves and their bodies. An event and its reception are made up of a unique complex of conditions over time and space. We don't just see colours and shapes; we see things. What is more, when we see things we apprehend

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[131] Synæsthesia is a poorly-understood perceptual phenomenon in which an individual experiencing one form of sensory stimulation involuntarily experiences or interprets it in a second form. For example, some synæsthetes strongly associate numbers with colours, whilst for others, sounds that they hear produce physical sensations in various parts of the body. A particularly interesting example for our purposes is mirror synæsthesia, where individuals feel the same sensation that another person feels (such as touch). For instance, when such a synæsthete observes someone being tapped on their shoulder, the synæsthete involuntarily feels a tap on their own shoulder as well. It is difficult to calculate the proportion of the population who have this experience, partly because it takes so many different forms, and occurs in a range of modes, from occasional to permanent. Research suggests a prevalence of around 4.4%. See J. Simner et al., 'Synæsthesia: the Prevalence of Atypical Cross-modal Experiences' *Perception,* 35.8 (2006), 1024–1033.

[132] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader,* ed. by Johnson, 65.

them as wet or dry, warm or cold, heavy or light etc. We don't even need to touch a pool of water to know that it will feel wet, and that it will create ripples if disturbed. The degree of intentionality of perception depends on the state of development of normativity of the body schema.

The business of understanding the world was, for Merleau-Ponty, a matter of simple instinct on one level, and on another, an intense grappling for coherence. In this, he identified strongly with the painter Paul Cezanne, whose obsessive attempts to create something as real as reality were a matter of artistic honour. Where impressionism had been about trying to capture on canvas the way in which objects strike the senses, and particularly the eyes, Cezanne wanted to represent an object in its reality as he perceived it — to create a piece of nature realized at a moment in time, and not just a picture of it. Of the Old Masters, he said "They created pictures; we are attempting a piece of nature."[133] His frustration came from the fact that he thought himself powerless because he was not omnipotent. Unlike God, he could not create or even recreate, but only copy and interpret as he reached for integrity.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne did not separate feeling and thought. He did not, in that sense, feel that he had authority to apply artistic judgement. So, for example, he had no room for the rules of perspective, or for the conceits of juxtaposed colours used by an artist like Van Gogh. Cezanne used many more colours than his immediate predecessors, and created graduated tones and shading (unlike, for example, Van Gogh's distinct flecks of separated colour) in a dedicated but ultimately futile attempt to make a new thing that was exactly equivalent to the thing as he saw it. He understood that a three-dimensional object in space and time could not be wholly represented in a two-dimensional painting, and yet saw it as his vocation to try to do just that. His torment as an artist lay in the inevitability of compromise. This, Merleau-Ponty characterised as 'Cezanne's Doubt', an angst for accuracy in interpretation of experience that the two clearly shared. For example, in his essay of that name,

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[133] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt', 62.

Merleau-Ponty describes the necessary limitation of Cezanne in trying to represent the perception of depth using only paint.

> The contour of an object conceived as a line encircling the object belongs not to the visible world but to geometry. If one outlines the shape of an apple with a continuous line, one makes an object of the shape, whereas the contour is rather the ideal limit toward which the sides of the apple recede in depth. Not to indicate any shape would be to deprive the objects of their identity.[134]

For Merleau-Ponty, the difference between an apple as object and a painting of an apple served as proof of two key elements of his understanding of perception. Positively, the intensity of the experience of the apple, evidenced in the 'suicidal' impossibility of even a great artist executing an adequate representation of it, served as proof of the role of the whole body, with its overlapping and integrated senses, in the perception of what is outside of the self. Negatively, the relative meaninglessness of an image of an apple — a 'virtual' apple, as it were — compared to the reality of a unique, solid, infinitely colourful, sweet-tasting apple, served as proof of how much schematic weight is lost when its place in space and time are removed from an object by the process of reproduction.

Carol Armstrong describes Cezanne's phenomenological appeal to Merleau-Ponty:

> The doubleness of the phenomenological understanding of the human condition – that the world is already given prior to our arrival on the scene, and yet is endlessly open in its coming-into-being before us – is perfectly rendered in the equal doubleness of Cezanne's project: which by his own account was to represent a primordial, pre-human world that was at the same time in a never-finished state of being born into human perception.[135]

In much of Merleau-Ponty's writing, the task of the painter was used as an analogy for the chiasm of seeing and being seen. The reciprocal gaze represented in the relation

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[134] Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt', 65.

[135] Carol Armstrong, *Cézanne's Gravity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), 105.

between the object, the artist and the canvas was for him a microcosm of the torment of being in the world. The relationship of seeing and being seen, and of the visible and the invisible, which he saw exemplified in the tortured methodology of Cezanne, was a microcosm of the puzzle of the phenomenon of perception. What was the relationship of the object and reproduction of it, the thing and the image of the thing? Merleau-Ponty recognised that in his efforts to make images of objects, Cezanne was living out the dilemma that he was trying to describe. Where the object of the painting was tangible, such as Cezanne's 'astonishing' apples[136], the relationship was one of love and hate, desire and doubt.

"Painting from nature is not copying the object", Cézanne said to his subject Joachim Gasquet, "it is realizing one's sensations".[137] So, for Merleau-Ponty, perception occurs in the interplay of object and subjective sensation. In terms of sexual stimulation, for example, he felt that

> a scene does not have a sexual signification when I imagine, even confusedly, its possible relations to my sexual organs or to my states of pleasure, but rather when it exists for my body.[138]

This is highly relevant to the teledildonic technology where we began. Does an experience become sexual in the imagination, or in the stimulation of parts of the body? Or does its sexual signification lie in some deeper, less tangible place within the person?

The body uniquely 'understands' the world. It is able to predict and structure our awareness of objects through the habit or schema. For this reason, when I see a

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[136] Cezanne is reputed to have declared "With an apple, I want to astonish Paris".

[137] Paul Cezanne, as recorded in *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne, - a Memoir with Conversations*, trans. by Christopher Pemberton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 46.

[138] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 159.

painting of an apple, I know that it is just that — a painting of an apple. The intentionality of perception depends on the normativity of the body schema. Motivational connections also create context in experience. For this reason, I know that the painting of an apple is not actually an apple, but a canvas bearing paint that has been applied in space and time by an artist. I know what an apple feels like. If it were not for the velvet rope in the gallery, I could reach out and touch Cezanne's painting of an apple, and I would know for certain that it does not feel like an apple. I can make a choice to celebrate the painting of the apple, or to lament its lack of apple-ness.

What I cannot determine without further contextual information is whether the painting is of a particular apple that has (or had) an existence in reality, or whether it is a representation of a typical apple. Our contact with the world gives us a reflexive sense of ourselves and our bodies. The reproduction of an image by an artist strips out a great deal of information about the apple. Perhaps there was a worm in the apple, that the artist hasn't included in the painting. Or perhaps that particular apple never existed except in the artist's imagination. Still, if the artist is good, and is working with integrity, I can safely assume that this painting in some way represents an apple that the artist has seen and touched. "Painting exists first of all in each painter who works, and it is there is a pure state."[139] However, once that painting, the creation of which took so much skill and energy from the artist, is reproduced by a printing press with virtually no effort, distributed to strangers, purchased and hung on the wall of a student bedsit, it is so compromised by the accretion of motivations applied in its journey from the artist to the wall that it can be said to have an entirely different meaning from the original.

Likewise, I know, or can imagine, what human sexual touch feels like. I can predict and structure it through habit or schema. If I know that human sexual touch does not schematically involve a latex device, however life-like, I must decide whether to adapt

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[139] Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 99.

my schema to include this new meaning and motivation, or to identify that this experience is something else.

6   Reciprocal awareness: touching and being touched

Part of the puzzle of perception is not simply how we know anything, but whether and how we can be known in return. To explore this question I will set Merleau-Ponty in the context of the other early phenomenologists with whom he was in dialogue.

Much of the discussion of this issue has been framed in terms of gaze. For Levinas, 'the face of the other', albeit not reducible to any visible form, calls out to the ethical self in the world. For Foucault, gaze was a tool of power and oppression, hence the "infinitely scrupulous concern with surveillance"[140] inherent in the design of French prisons. Where Foucault understood gaze as primarily a one-way street, Merleau-Ponty tried to understand its circularity, the reflexive simultaneity of an object's being and its being seen.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was originally a mathematician. Troubled by the problem of certainty posed by Socrates, he sought to 'bracket out' all assumptions in order to create a scientific certainty based solely on what he hoped to establish was the pure evidence of perception. Husserl (like Descartes) relied on a pre-existing sense of self — a 'transcendental ego'. He assumed that all experience is experience of something, and that to think at all must be to think about something. "All sensings belong to my soul [*Seele*], everything extended [belongs] to the material thing".[141] By extension, to touch (or see or hear, etc.) must be to touch something, for nothing cannot be touched. There are echoes here of the unattainability of Platonic forms. A core difficulty that Husserl never fully overcame was that the very perception of the

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[140] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 173.

[141] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas, II*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1913), 150.

transcendental ego seems to require an external self to observe it. Without a pre-existing sense of self, how could I prove that the body that seems to be feeling or perceiving something is actually my body?

Charles Taylor seeks to overcome this by asserting that human beings are self-interpreting animals.

> The claim is that our interpretation of ourselves and our experience is constitutive of what we are, and therefore cannot be considered as merely a view on reality, separable from reality.[142]

In other words, we cannot, in a reductionist or physicalist way, dismiss all human interpretation of experience as merely subjective, because this business of interpretation is fundamentally constitutive of who we are as persons.

> As men [*sic*] we are self-defining beings, and we are partly what we are in virtue of the self-definitions which we have accepted, however we have come by them. What self-definitions we understand and what ones we do not, is closely linked with the self-definitions which help to constitute what we are.[143]

We know what we are touching, because we know who we are.

Taylor follows Husserl to the extent that he distinguishes between the things we are aware of, and the contents of our awareness of them. In consequence, when a person touches an object, they don't only perceive what lies in front of them, but also a vast background of experiences and cultural associations that attach to that object. Husserl felt that this wider schema is a one-way street, a cultural map to which only the toucher has access. At root, a person could perceive themselves as a transcendental, psychophysical unity, and by extension they could perceive others in their physical existence. However, it would not be possible to access the other in *their* transcendental existence, since that is inaccessible from the starting place of the individual. For Husserl, the fact of touching an other indicates that the other exists,

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[142] Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 2*, 47.

[143] Taylor, 'Self-interpreting Animals', 54.

but the experience and interpretation of that touch is accessible only to the perceiving individual. Where Husserl saw the crossing of this distance between self and other as an insurmountable problem, Taylor sees it as a challenge. It is the task of humanity, and the function of language.

Husserl, like Aristotle, regarded the sense of touch as unique in a number of ways. He saw it as the perimeter sense. He also acknowledged that touch has a reflexive quality unlike other senses. For Husserl, touch is

> a unique sense, because when I touch something with my hand, I not only feel the object; I also feel myself feeling it. This is unique; e.g. the eye doesn't sense itself seeing.[144]

Husserl calls this "the double aspect of tactile sensation". It is most clearly exemplified in the experience of a person touching their left hand with their own right hand. It is this "double sensation" of touch, unparalleled in other senses, that according to Husserl, anchors us in the body and localizes us in the world.

> Everything we see is touchable and, as such, points to an immediate relation to the body, though it does not do so in virtue of its visibility. A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not at all have an appearing body […] The body as such can be constituted originally only in tactility.[145]

Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980) dealt with Husserl's dependence on an external self largely by rejecting it. In *Being and Nothingness,* he wrote that existence is a given, preceding essence. The 'other' has existence only in my own perception, as "the one who looks at me".[146] Encountering a third person is different from encountering an object because I perceive that I am observed by a person, in a way that I am not observed by an object. This will become relevant when we consider the role of the

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[144] Husserl, *Ideas II*, 150.

[145] Husserl, *Ideas II,* 150.

[146] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

gaze of the other (or of God) in Rowan Williams' understanding of personhood. For Sartre, touching and caressing had a distinct role in both revealing the enfleshedness of the individual and in constituting the flesh of the other. In *Being and Nothingness,* he wrote that

> The caress reveals the Other's flesh as flesh to myself and to the Other [...] It is my body as flesh which causes the Other's flesh to be born.[147]

For Sartre there are in effect two internal experiences of the body; the body as it is for me, and the body as others discover it. He called them *le corps-existé* and *le corps-vu*. Or to be more accurate, there are three experiences, for to the others he adds the manner in which I experience my body as it is experienced by others. Perhaps the simplest way to illustrate this third experience is through emotions such as shame or embarrassment. These feelings, even the third category, are rooted in the individual psyche, since they can be experienced in the abstract, even when the other is not physically present. This three-ness has some pre-echoes of the three-ness of Rowan Williams' theological anthropology — the realisation of personhood in the recognition of my self, the other, and the other's reaching out to me in desire.

Sartre marks out the limitations of the physiological approach to touch when he describes the body as it is understood by biologists as the "body of others" (*le corps d'autrui*). The inner anatomy of my senses can be understood up to a point by dissection and physical analysis. But as an individual I am unlikely to be aware of the functioning of my Meissner corpuscles, Pacinian corpuscles and the other apparatus of touch. Instead I am aware of my hand as an object in the world, and I am aware of the sensations it produces.

> For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness, but not itself. Thus I see this hand only in the way that I see this inkwell. I unfold a distance between it and me.[148]

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[147] Sartre*, Being and Nothingness*, 390.

[148] Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 308.

It is in the unfolded distance between my self and the object, and more particularly in the impossibility of fully overcoming that distance, that I understand my embodied self to exist. In touching the other, I encounter myself as flesh. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty differed subtly here. Though Sartre understood that the body is primarily present to the individual in the experience of being there for others, he strongly resisted the idea that our understanding of self should begin from this external, third-person perspective. The world is a given, in which we find ourselves; what Heidegger called "being in the world". We necessarily reach out to the world from our incarnated bodies — what Sartre calls the "upsurge" (*surgissement*) of the *pour-soi* towards the world without which the other has no life or meaning.

Where Sartre and Husserl proposed a world of subject and object, Merleau-Ponty went further. Husserl distinguished between the object of awareness and the contents of one's awareness of it, but Merleau-Ponty followed a more Aristotelian path, suggesting that perception is dependent on a relationship between person and object. He proposed a world of self and other, leading (at least in his earlier writing) to a mutual recognition of one person and another person both alive and effectively reaching out towards each other. The fact of the other is not required in order to constitute the observer, because they *are*, simply by virtue of their own consciousness. Nevertheless, I know that I am a person, and I know that the other person is a person too, because I recognise the other person as being-like-myself. It is this inextricable "entwinement" that was, for Merleau-Ponty (and especially in his later work *The Visible and The Invisible*), the essence of being in the flesh.

This adds a further dimension to Husserl's "double aspect" of tactile sensation. When I touch something, I feel the object, and I feel myself feeling it. But do I necessarily feel myself being felt by it? This third dimension of tactile sensation may depend on whether the object being felt is itself sentient. If the object being touched is sentient — as in the case of an animal or a human — it might be possible not only to feel the object, and to feel oneself feeling it, but also to know that that which is touching you is aware of doing so — even if were not possible to fully access the meaning and motivation that was attached to the action. For this further step to be possible at all

would be dependent on at least two things: the toucher themselves having consciousness and intentionality, and the touchee having access to, or at least awareness of, that sentience.

This is where the task of language comes in, which according to Taylor is what distinguishes humans from other animals. Articulating and interpreting is what we do. "We must speak of man as a self-interpreting being, because this kind of interpretation is not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence."[149]

Can a baboon feel dignity, Taylor asked? Well, it can behave in a way that *looks like* human dignity, as numerous Tik-Toks illustrate. But the baboon (kitten, panda, etc.) must be feeling something different from a human, because our sense of an emotion such as dignity (embarrassment, anger, etc.) is shaped by the language in which we express it. Baboons don't share that language, so what they experience may be real, but it is not what we would call dignity. It makes sense to say 'that baboon looks dignified', meaning that the baboon looks a bit like humans look when they are evincing dignity. But it makes no sense to say 'that baboon is dignified', because baboons do not have access to the concept of dignity as it is understood in human culture.

A situation might be conceived in which a person knew that they were being touched, but was not able to tell whether or not the thing that was touching them was conscious. This is reminiscent of the 'Turing Test' proposed by Alan Turing in his celebrated 1950 paper 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence'.[150] Turing, in the context of exploring the question 'Can Machines think?', proposed what he called 'The Imitation Game', in which an interrogator asks questions of a man and a woman in another room in an attempt to determine the correct sex of the two players. He wondered whether a machine could be devised that would be so good at imitating one

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[149] Taylor, 'Self-interpreting Animals', 65.

[150] Alan Turing, 'Computing Machinery and Intelligence', *Mind,* 59, no. 236 (October 1950), 433–460.

of the subjects that the interrogator could not call the sex correctly. In conceiving his game, Turing deliberately excluded information provided by the common senses, leaving the interrogator with only typeset responses to questions. In this way he hoped to isolate the machine as conveying disembodied information. We have already seen that such a reductionist approach doesn't describe the realities of human interaction.

An alternative test (with similar limitations) might allow an interrogator to touch an object that they could not see, and through touch alone determine whether the object was human, animal or other. On one level, even in a digital context, the challenge is a merely mechanical one. Just as Turing concluded that there was no reason in principle why a machine could not be created that would fool an observer as to its sex, so there is no reason in principle why one could not create a machine that was so realistic that it would confuse even the complex physiology of touch of which humans are capable. This raises a core phenomenological and ethical question. What (if anything) is the difference between being touched by some*one* or some*thing*? In a digital world where so much human engagement is disembodied, and the possibilities of realistically synthesised touch move closer, that question is at the heart of this inquiry. If a person being touched did not know whether he or she was being touched by an animate being or by a machine, what would change? Further to that, if a person did not know whether they were being touched by a human or a machine, what would be the ethically appropriate way to receive or engage with the object doing the touching?

7   A pregnant pause: An excursus on touch and the phenomenology of pregnancy

This brief excursus on the phenomenology of pregnancy dips a toe into a substantial and fascinating field that has potential to offer a microcosm of the issues around touch and perception. The phenomenon of pregnancy bears consideration as one of the primary grounds on which concepts of the meaning of touch are tested.

As the somatosensory system of the foetus begins to develop, the first sense it acquires is touch. By week seven or eight of gestation, the foetus has developed touch receptors in the face, mostly on the lips and nose, that connect to its growing brain. By week nine the foetus is able to make deliberate movements, such as sucking its thumb or reaching out to attempt to grip an object. Touch receptors form on the genitals, palms and soles of the feet by week twelve and the abdomen by week seventeen. By the third trimester the foetus has gained a sense of touch all over its body that is sensitive enough to feel a single hair brushing across the body. Naturally, the unborn foetus has only the most basic cultural context by which to interpret such stimuli. For example, the foetus may display signs of distress or aversion, but is unable to articulate this as pain in the way that it might do after birth. In this growing ability to explore and respond to its environment, the foetus demonstrates a developing sense of subjectivity and an understanding that it has primitive agency, and even though that agency and subjectivity is shared with the mother in a complex and (literally) fluid inter-relationship, it appears to be touch that is the primary and guiding sense in this primal movement.

Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith write that

> In the attempt to clarify the structure of this specific, foundational experience, basic philosophical concepts are put to the test, such as the relation between selfhood and otherness, activity and passivity, autonomy and dependency, inside and outside, and so forth.[151]

In seeking to understand the meaning of touch in perception and personhood, pregnancy offers significant unique insights, for at least three reasons. The first is that it is a universal human experience, in the sense that we have all experienced what it is to be an unborn foetus.

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[151] Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith, 'Introduction', in *Phenomenology of Pregnancy,* ed. Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith (Stockholm, Södertörn Philosophical Studies: 2016), 7.

The second reason why pregnancy offers an instructive case study is that, although Bornemark and Smith don't say so specifically, the experience shared by the foetus and the pregnant mother is of touching and being touched more comprehensively than any other human circumstance. It is reminiscent of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's example of a left hand touching a right hand, except that it is a far more comprehensive experience. The foetus is touched at every point, and has no schema to draw on other than the experience of being enfolded in its mother. It is an ultimate instance of "the double sensation" of touching and being touched, or of Merleau-Ponty's intertwining *chiasm*.

The third reason why pregnancy offers significant insights is that it is a profound illustration of the idea that touch is a sacramental activity. In pregnancy there is precarity and dependence, there is mutual self-giving, and there also the possibility of grace in its most mystical and most generative form, the production of new life, in and from existing life.

Both Husserl and early Merleau-Ponty rely on an inter-subjective foundation, where a particular 'I' encounters an other that is distinct from it in time and/or space. Luce Irigaray's work on the phenomenology of pregnancy challenges the foundations of Husserlian phenomenology. In pregnancy, a distinct 'I and other' are not perceived visually, across a distance, but invisibly, haptically, in a narrative that plays out within the bounds of a single human entity.

> If we take into consideration the fact that a woman is able to apprehend another living being in her own body, and to house or host this other, then we have to question the presupposition that self and other are necessarily separated by a spatial distance. The subject that feels a sensing and moving other inside her own living body is different from the subject that sees the other at a distance over there.[152]

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[152] Sara Heinämaa, 'On Luce Irigaray's phenomenology of intersubjectivity: Between the feminine body and its other', in *Returning to Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy, Politics, and the Question of Unity*, ed. by M. C. Cimitile and E. P. Miller (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 243–265.

The converse is also true, since a foetus subjectively experiences life inside the body of another, first and foundationally through the medium of touch, and subsequently through the other senses, but without having developed any cultural or phenomenological schema or 'depth of field'. To describe this as a special case would be spurious and androcentric, given that the relationship between foetus and mother is one of the few things that might legitimately be described as a universal human experience. Not that Husserl had not struggled with this. In 1932 he wrote:

> Do we not here have to do with an intermingling of primordialities, that does not depend on empathy? Does the mother amongst her own, inner sensory fields [...] also have those of the child, its sensibility of movement, its kinaesthesia? But if that is not the case, then what kind of community is it?[153]

His answer was to suggest that the sense perception of the foetus is to be included within the experience of the mother. Sigmund Freud also felt that the foetus had no sense of otherness at all before birth. But then neither man had been kicked from within whilst they were trying to get to sleep!

Not only does the experience of pregnancy, according to Luce Irigaray, challenge the fundamental suppositions of Husserlian phenomenology, but the fact that this experience of knowing an other without the context of distance is available only to women introduces an inevitable gendered distinction. A woman is capable of knowing another person within herself, whilst a man is only capable of knowing an other in an external context. A foetus of whatever gender has at first no schema within which to interpret what it knows, since its entire frame of reference has been mediated through its experience in its mother's womb.

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[153] Edmund Husserl research manuscript, cited in Claudia Serban, 'From Tendencies and Drives to Affectivity and Ethics: Husserl and Scheler on the Mother–Child Relationship', *Human Studies* (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-024-09707-8.

Pregnancy, therefore, in which mother and foetus are aware of each other as separate persons, joined by mutual touch (but without the addition of sight) presents a fine illustration of the relationship between mutual touch and personhood. The foetus is clearly enveloped by the mother's body, and completely dependent on it, so much so that at one level it would be right to see them as undivided. The foetus is touched by the mother constantly and at every external point, for the whole of its first nine months of existence. The nutrition that allows it to survive and grow comes directly from its mother by ingestion. The mother in turn touches the foetus constantly through the medium of amniotic fluid inside her womb, and also through the umbilical cord and endometrium. In the early stages of development there is a complete continuity of time and place between the two. The very first and most extensive experience of any human being is of being touched and held constantly over a long period of its physical and psychological development. Yet from the earliest weeks of pregnancy the foetus is also having touch experiences that even the mother does not share. "The foetus is active, initiates action and does not only respond, and so on — in short, it must have its own form of intentionality that is not merely mediated through the mother."[154]

Iris Marion Young says that the pregnant woman simultaneously "experiences her body as herself and not herself".[155] This gives the pregnant female a unique "split subjectivity", between head and trunk, between self and foetus and between past and future. Pregnancy also creates a unique link between the expectant mother's past self, located as a foetus in her own mother's body, and her present/future self as one-becoming-two persons. Pregnancy "continues the radical undermining of Cartesianism that [Strauss and Merleau-Ponty] inaugurated, but it also challenges their implicit

[154] Nicholas Smith, 'Phenomenology of Pregnancy: A Cure for Philosophy', in *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, ed. by Bornemark and Smith, 46.

[155] Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy,* 9 (1984), 46.

assumptions of a unified subject and sharp distinction between transcendence and immanence".[156] There is a movement towards distinct embodiment, and the parallel movement towards increasing independence of sensation might be seen as challenging Merleau-Ponty's early assumptions about the primacy of sensation over self-actualisation. Bornemark says that:

> 'Experiencing' is […] formulated as a phenomenon that comes before subjectivity and as a consequence the formation of subjectivity needs to be understood from intersubjectivity, rather than the other way around.[157]

Kristeva writes that "Pregnancy seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech."[158] Joan Raphael-Leff suggests that the contemporary focus on autonomous individuality (not to mention androcentrism) in society, and particularly in medicine, makes this radical form of co-existence of self and other in pregnancy particularly complicated to engage with.[159]

Every mother carrying a healthy foetus feels the unborn child moving in the womb. The father, pressing a hand on his pregnant partner's belly, may obtain a partial sense of this split experience. It will be the first tangible means by which he can relate to the child. He may feel the child moving — though of course he can only at this stage feel the mother's moving skin. The father may be unclear whether the movement he can feel belongs to the foetus or to the mother, but he is at least certain that his own body

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[156] Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment', 46.

[157] Bornemark and Smith (eds.), *Phenomenology of Pregnancy,* 7.

[158] Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi, trans. by Alice Jardin and Harry Blake (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 206.

[159] Joan Raphael-Leff, '"Two-in-One-Body": Unconscious Representations and Ethical Dimensions of Inter-Corporeality in Childbearing', in *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, ed. by Bornemark and Smith, 157–198.

is separate from that which he is feeling. Whatever sensations he can receive are conveyed through the relatively normal channels of touch. A father might report that he has felt the baby moving, but he is unlikely to claim that he has touched it or been touched by it.

For the pregnant mother, the experience is radically different. The feeling of movement within her is not sensed by her hands, but directly through her central nervous system. The way those feelings are interpreted is unlike any other experience of touch or pain. For the mother, the feeling is radically de-centred and yet also subjective. What she feels is wholly herself, but at the same time wholly other. The foetus exists as something inside of her, separate in person, yet wholly one with her. She cannot intentionally touch the foetus, but at the same time she cannot avoid touching it and being touched by it. The boundaries of her body, and of her personhood, are in flux.[160]

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of all human connectedness, of contact with any other, is described in terms that verge on the miraculous. He seems to draw on the language of pregnancy as an analogy of all intersectionality, frequently using the word *prégnance,* though without ever quite relating it to the specific experience of child-bearing.[161]

As April Flakne says, the pregnant mother

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[160] The experience is all the more extraordinary given that a pregnant woman may well be carrying — and therefore in some senses one with — a genetic male.

[161] He does this particularly in *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, translated by Talia Welsh (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), but also e.g. in *Visible and Invisible,* 206, 208. Francine Wynn notes that "the sense of pregnancy as the 'source' is very strong in the later writings of Merleau-Ponty. Pregnancy appears to be a primordial phenomenon that cannot be extinguished even though it is used metaphorically rather than literally in his writings". Francine Wynn, 'The early relationship of mother and pre-infant: Merleau-Ponty and pregnancy', *Nursing Philosophy* 3:1, 2022, 4-14.

is summoned simultaneously from within and without to create of and from herself a point of contact with a strange other that promises to give rise to an impossible, natal event.[162]

In pregnancy, Flakne says,

> The incipient other announces herself to me interoceptively, from within me, as the sensory habits that contribute to my body schema, exteroception and proprioception become deranged, forcing me to adjust my relationship to the environment through her incipience and imminence.[163]

Pregnancy prefigures every human–human contact, as distinct from every human–object contact, in that it has the effect of disordering and reordering the persons both in tangible, physical ways, through a kind of interoceptive and proprioceptive reordering, as well as reordering the external and schematic order of both individuals. Pregnancy is a state of precarity and potential. It changes everything – but then so does every human touch. I am in touch with the world, as I was in touch with my mother in the womb. As Flakne says,

> Other bodies affect us on interoceptive, proprioceptive, and intrasensory "levels" at all times, and the other greets us, announces herself somatically as well as ideationally to us.[164]

The nausea and the sensory derangement of early pregnancy are only extreme cases of the "prosaic" encounter with others that Merleau-Ponty here describes. If Merleau-Ponty is right, every encounter with the other — flesh suspended in flesh — prompts some degree of contact, of greeting as sensory re-arrangement, even if there is no plain touch. I see you on the other side of the street, and my steps quicken. I hear your voice on the phone, and my heart beats faster. The other alters me from within, affecting interoceptive and proprioceptive functioning even if, unlike pregnancy, the

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[162] April Flakne, 'Nausea as Interoceptive Annunciation', in *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, ed. by Bornemark and Smith, 116.

[163] Flakne, 'Nausea as Interoceptive Annunciation', 118.

[164] Flakne, 'Nausea as Interoceptive Annunciation', 116–117.

other remains external to me. This is the beginning of what I will later explore as a sacramental understanding of touch.

This chapter began with a review of the philosophy of touch as it was understood by Aristotle and others in the Western philosophical tradition. It seems best, with Matthew Ratcliffe, not to understand touch as a singular phenomenon, but as a heterogeneous construction of physiological, cultural and social functions that are directed towards perception, communication and control of the world. Human touch is an event at which meaning is created and recognised. The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that touch distinguishes the self from the other. It evidences both the nearness and the distance of the other, and creates a dehiscence. This invites reflection on the theological significance of touch as locus of revelation, and it is to this that we will now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

TOUCHING SOME*ONE*

> The body itself is a screen
> to shield and partially reveal
> the light that's blazing
> inside your presence.[165]
>
> Rumi

The theological anthropology of Rowan Williams

My purpose in this chapter and the one that follows is to develop a theological understanding of touch in conversation with Rowan Williams. As I step towards a framework for a theology of touch that will work in a digital world, I will address two key questions. The first is, how does the work of Rowan Williams help to illuminate the meaning of sensation in theological anthropology? The second is, in what ways might the additional consideration of touch enhance Williams' reliance on gaze as a defining marker of human–divine and human–human relationships?

Rowan Williams' theological anthropology is apophatic and personalist, and springs from the mystical trinitarian theology of the Eastern church, particularly as it has been re-expressed by Vladimir Lossky. This leads Williams to an understanding of consciousness that is both thoroughly located and also eschatological. "Human responsiveness to the self-gift of God is inescapably a matter of the shape of an embodied life."[166] What else could it be but embodied, when there is no life but

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[165] From Jelaluddin Rumi, "A Story is Like Water", in *The Essential Rumi,* trans. by Coleman Barks (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 171.

[166] Rowan Williams, 'The Elements of a Christological Anthropology', *Perichoresis,* 19.2 (2021), 8.

embodied life? These three factors — the apophatic method, the person as the fundamental unit of human being, and the nature of trinitarian relationship, will become the basis of applying Williams' anthropology to the construction of a theology of touch for a digital culture. Three questions are implicit in these characteristics. How do we know? What are the boundaries of a person? And how do persons engage with other persons and with the world? These three questions are immediately recognizable from what we have already written about the concerns of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Williams applies them to relationships between the human and the divine, and by extension relationships between humans. These questions will be equally important to the construction of the relationship between human and machine.

Williams himself has not written a great deal about touch, and yet has come very close to it in his discussions of desire and gaze. Nor has he written much specifically about mechanization. His extensive work on the role of faith in the public square tends to focus on the social and (more recently) environmental dynamics of humanity in the world. I hope it may be helpful to extend some of that thinking to the specific place of touch in machine-driven culture.

Drawing on his understanding of the Trinity, Williams' personalist anthropology locates human identity in the desire of the other. From his 1989 essay 'The Body's Grace'[167] onwards, gratuitous desire (i.e., desire motivated by grace alone) and its expression in sex has had a sacramental significance for him. Williams has normally expressed this desire in terms of gaze, but given his emphasis on authenticity, I believe it could equally be expressed in terms of touch. Indeed, I will argue that to construct it in haptic terms adds a further layer of significance.

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[167] Rowan Williams, 'The Body's Grace', in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309–321.

This will give us a framework in which to consider the implications of digitally synthesised or mediated human engagement. For example, many individuals and couples benefit from engagement with a counsellor. Such a relationship can help the subjects to find self-understanding, health and peace. But counselling relationships are intensive and costly. A highly-developed computer programme can offer many of the benefits of counselling at shorter notice, a fraction of the cost, and significantly free from the limitations of space and time. It might even offer some advantages over face to face counselling, in that a programme could have a larger bank of experience to draw upon, and less of the inevitable prejudice and fallibility of a human counsellor. However, there are obvious potential down-sides in a human–machine counselling relationship: the loss of warmth, authentic empathy and intuition, to name just a few.

A similar list of pros and cons accompanies any prospective sexual relationship between a human being and a machine. A sexual act between a human and a computer is cheap, and relatively risk-free, with few of the perils of human–human sexual interaction. And yet there are surely losses too, which we need to explore. Williams' understanding of mutual desire suggests that any form of sex with a machine, just like other forms of digitally mediated engagement, is potentially inauthentic, dehumanising and akin to idolatry.

1   Background to the theological anthropology of Rowan Williams

Rowan Williams is a theologian and poet, who served as Archbishop of Wales (2000–2002), Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012) and Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge (2013–2020). An immensely prolific writer, Williams has produced many books of popular theology and devotion such as *Being Human, Lost Icons* and *Grace and Necessity*, as well as countless articles, lectures, poems, and academic texts such as *On Christian Theology* (2000), *Wrestling with Angels* (2007) and *On Augustine* (2016).

Williams finds himself at the confluence of Eastern and Western streams of trinitarian theology. He is a Russophile who is majorly influenced by the theology of Eastern

Orthodoxy, and particularly the thinking of Vladimir Lossky. Lossky, who was the subject of Williams' PhD thesis, was an Orthodox theologian born in Germany in 1903, who studied in St Petersburg before being exiled to Paris in 1922. He lived and worked there until his tragically early death. Williams' own theological anthropology can be traced through Lossky's *In the Image and Likeness of God,* and particularly the chapter on 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person'. Here, Lossky sets out the typically Orthodox distinction between *hypostasis* (person) and *ousia* (being), which is both a Christological and anthropological construction upon which Williams relies. Both Lossky and Williams are profoundly trinitarian, but as Lossky points out in his *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* Western thought tends to start with one nature and proceed to three persons, while Eastern thought goes the other way.

In *Christ the Stranger,* Benjamin Myers identifies three periods in Williams' thinking. During the first period in the 1970s and 1980s Williams, following Wittgenstein, began to be interested in the relationship between language and sociality. In the second period, defined by Myers as the late 1980s and the 1990s, he was asking whether social order is more than the sum of its parts. In the late 1990s and onwards, during which he served as Archbishop of Wales and then of Canterbury, he was asking (after Freud) whether human beings are capable of unselfish love. *Pace* Myers, these three themes may be better understood as layers rather than a strict sequence.

Rowan Williams has what we might call an ecclesial phenomenology, rooted in the Greek Fathers and Russian orthodoxy. John Zizioulas writes that

> The bishops of [the patristic era], pastoral theologians such as St Ignatius of Antioch and above all St Irenaeus and later St Athanasius, approached the being of God through the experience of the ecclesial community, of ecclesial being. This experience revealed something very important: the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love. Being means life, and life means communion.[168]

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[168] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 16.

Zizioulas and Williams differ in emphasis, in that for Zizioulas ecclesial personhood is located in the sacrament of baptism, whilst for Williams it is located in the experience of community. One effect of this is that for Zizioulas, personhood is established prior to relationship, whilst for Williams, personhood emerges *within* relationship — first in relationship with God, and then the mother, and then the wider family and community. Zizioulas also suggests an eschatological dynamic and a universal character to personhood that are less evident in Williams, for whom personhood without immanent relationship is unthinkable.

Loving desire and causeless delight have always been primary in Williams' understanding of the gospel. In particular, they motivate his ecclesiology and his social ethics. The roots of his understanding of sexual desire are can be found in chapter four of Lossky's *Dogmatic Theology*, where Lossky introduces the notion of 'desire in tension' to describe the relationship between the human and God, saying that "The love God claims is not physical attraction, but a living tension of opposites."[169] This is the pattern on which he says that human–human relationships are founded. As Lossky says, "A personal being is able to love someone more than one's own nature, more than one's own life."[170] This also implies and requires the ability to reject the other. Some of this thinking was crystallised in 'The Body's Grace',[171] an early and profoundly significant lecture delivered in 1989 to The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement when Williams was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford — though perhaps 'crystallised' is the wrong word, given that his own stance, like his sense of the gospel, are both relational and dynamic, messy and mysterious.

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[169] Vladimir Lossky, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. by Olivier Cleimont and Michel Stavrou, trans. by Anthony P. Gythiel, 2nd edn. (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 87.

[170] Lossky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 87.

[171] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 312.

According to Mike Higton, the very notion of embracing difference is at the centre of Rowan Williams' ecclesiology, and shaped his role as Archbishop of Canterbury. In 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace' Higton describes how Williams wants to use differences as a call to a deeper engagement, a deeper obedience to the gospel. If you can see in the other a desire for God, keep talking.[172] The notion of being faithful to difference — including sexual ambiguity — as a core part of the process of the gospel was definitive for Williams' tenure as archbishop, but also posed great challenges in a church where many were looking for certainties, especially from their leaders.

It is in the nature of Williams' theology that he draws heavily on secular philosophy and literature, from Dostoyevsky to Thomas Nagel. Theologians with a more conservative approach to Biblical authority, such as Andrew Cameron, criticise Williams for taking human essence as a starting point. Cameron suggests that it is the Bible that should be allowed to interpret humanity, and not vice versa.[173] Whilst respecting this position, it begs the question, reminiscent of the phenomenological dilemma of Edmund Husserl, of how the Bible as an 'other' can have the objective stance required for this. Williams in turn critiques conservative views on sex and marriage as being anti-theological and abstract, because they defer to constructions such as natural law, gender complementarity and *ad hoc* uses of the Bible.

2   Vladimir Lossky and the Eastern roots of Rowan Williams' theological anthropology

2.1   Apophatic

Vladimir Lossky's apophaticism draws on Dionysius the Areopagite and Gregory Palamas. The core of his thesis is that knowing God takes us through and beyond

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[172] Mike Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace: Obedience and Faithfulness in Rowan Williams' Ecclesiology', *Ecclesiology,* 7 (2011), 7–28.

[173] Andrew Cameron, 'Desire and Grace: Rowan Williams and the Search for Bodily Wholeness', in *On Rowan Williams*, ed. by Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 148-149.

intellect to contemplation, and (following Gregory Nazianzen) that the vehicle for that journey is the Trinity. The Trinity is stability when all else is change. The Trinity disturbs the logic of individuality. There is no process or person in the Trinity that is contingent on the creation. It does not express itself; it is perceptible only in contemplation, which is a form of "unmastery". The end goal of apophatic theology is not a nature, an essence or a person, but the Trinity.

Williams, after Lossky, sees God as unknowable, yet revealed through God's unknowableness. God is "the great 'negative theologian' who shatters all our images by addressing us in the cross of Christ".[174] Given that there is no history of transactions in God, and no unhistorical way of knowing God, all that remains is to know God in human history. "We cannot say what God is in himself; all we have is the narrative of God with us."[175] We depend for knowing this unknowable God on human senses and perception. In a further twist to this paradox Williams says there are "deep patterns of similarity between the inner life of God and what is revealed amongst humanity and (supremely) Jesus Christ".[176] Jesus "translates into human terms what and who God the Son eternally is" and through this we realise that "God's life is compatible with every bit of human life".[177]

Williams says that Jesus reveals God to us through both analogy and dialectic. That might not seem much help, given that it is as difficult to speak about the personhood of humans as it is to speak about the personhood of God, but that is precisely how he

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[174] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd edn. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 149.

[175] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 159.

[176] Andrew Moody, 'The Hidden Centre: Trinity and Incarnation in the Negative (and Positive) Theology of Rowan Williams', in *On Rowan Williams*, ed. by Matheson Russell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 25–46.

[177] Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 12.

understands the human calling. This is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's challenge that the task of personhood is to find language with which to discover and engage the personhood of others. For Williams, this quest for language is tentatively realised in personal relations and perhaps supremely in sexual encounter. Apophatic theology is anchored in the reality of *kenosis* — human and divine.[178] There is, in God, something that we can call love, desire, or gift, and the God who is unknowable and wholly other is incarnate, and known to us in time and space through human sensation, but only if you are prepared to "purge yourself of desire, and present yourself with your need only and the simple offering of your faith, green as a leaf".[179]

2.2   Personalist

The heart of Williams' theological anthropology is *personalist* rather than *individualist*.[180] The roots of this are to be found in the Trinitarian ontology of the Early Church Fathers, who distinguished *hypostasis* (person) from *ousia* (being), enabling them to speak of God as three persons in one substance. In this Williams draws on Lossky's *Theological Notion of the Human Person.*[181] Lossky writes that the humanity of Christ was pre-existent as an *ousia* but not as a *hypostasis*. It was at the conception that Christ was en-hypostasised, becoming incarnate first in his relationship to Mary and then at his birth, in relationship to other persons. In a similar way, every human is en-hypostasised as they take on embodied personhood, first in relation to their mother, and subsequently to other humans. This has profound implications, for

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[178] This is a theme throughout Williams' writings, but examples can be found e.g. in *On Christian Theology*, 178.

[179] R. S. Thomas, 'The Kingdom', in Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945 – 1990* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 233.

[180] Williams, 'The Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 10 ff.

[181] Vladimir Lossky, 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person', in Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God,* ed. by John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 111–123.

instance, for the ethics of abortion, which may hinge on the question of the actualisation or termination of the relationship between the foetus and its mother.

Lossky develops his theology in apposition to Plato. In his *Dogmatic* Theology, Lossky writes that:

> Man [sic] is a personal being like God and not a blind nature. Such is the character of the divine image in him. His relationship to the universe is somehow reversed when compared to the ancient concepts: instead of being 'disindividualized' to become 'cosmic', and thus being dissolved in a divine impersonal, his absolute connection as a person with a personalized God must allow him to 'personalize' the world.[182]

Central to this is that human beings are in a relationship analogous to the Trinity, though not in the way that some twentieth century theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann concluded, when they suggested that the internal dynamics of the Trinity could be viewed as a pattern for the human family or community. Instead, the analogy of relations applies to the three dimensions by which a person relates to another person, and to God. "Man the person is in relationship not only with his neighbour, but also with the personal God."[183]

Writing In *The Theological Notion of the Human Person*,[184] Lossky indicates that the Early Church Fathers would not have had a doctrine of the human individual in the way we understand it. This understanding of the person stems from and feeds into their understanding of God in Trinity. The *hypostasis* has all of the same attributes as the *ousia*, but is not reducible to it. Of course the truth lies beyond these concepts. They are constructs of philosophy, but they are signs of the personal reality of God. This notion of personhood goes beyond ontology as we normally understand it. It is a question of metaontology, that only God can ultimately know.

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[182] Lossky, Dogmatic Theology, 86.

[183] Lossky, Dogmatic Theology, 89.

[184] Lossky, 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person', 111–123.

The understanding that the *hypostasis* is irreducible has a crucial role in framing Lossky's (and subsequently Williams') theological anthropology. The human person is the primary unit of being; an individual distinct from others. Personhood is irreducible in a human. The personhood of a person is the whole nature that s/he 'enhypostasises.'

This raises the question of how we can distinguish between a human person (*hypostasis*) and a particular individual? What does 'person' mean in relation to an individual human? These will become important questions in understanding the relationship between a person and an other, and whether it makes a difference if that other is another human person or a different entity such as a machine. If the image of God is expressed in the *nous* or rational part of a person, i.e., the mind, then perhaps a *nous* that is mechanically synthesised could have an equal status to an organic human, and a comparable ability to relate. But Lossky argues that it is not only the *nous* that confers personhood on a human being. If it were so, then personhood would be reducible. The humanity of Christ wasn't pre-existent as a hypostasis, because Christ only became incarnate at his conception, but he existed as an individual substance (*ousia*) for all eternity. Christ did not have a *nous* because it was replaced by the divine Logos. It follows that the *imago dei* is not expressed in just one aspect of individual nature.

2.3   Trinitarian

Nothing is more fundamental in the theological framework of Lossky than the Trinity. The Trinity, which is beyond rationality and can be apprehended only through contemplation, is "the goal to which all apophatic theology leads […] it is something which transcends all notion both of nature and of person".[185] The distinction between creation and the Trinity is the foundational truth of existence. Lossky says that "if the

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[185] Vladimir Lossky, 'God in Trinity', in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 44.

very foundation of created being is change, the transition from non-being to being, if the creature is contingent by nature, the Trinity is an absolute stability".[186] There can be no second God, nor can there be any interior process or dialectic within God. Nothing depends or develops or resolves within God, for to conceive of God in progress or God in two parts would be nonsensical. God is first and last. There can only be God or no God. There cannot be God and another God.

Lossky follows St Gregory Nazianzen in moving from the inadequacy of duality in relation to God to the necessity of trinity. "St Gregory Nazianzen […] simply shows the insufficiency of any number other than three […] Two is the number which separates, three the number which transcends all separation."[187] St Basil is keen to emphasise that this doesn't imply counting God, because that would be contingent. God is the sum, not the measure. This brings Eastern theologians to the mystery of God in Trinity, a mystery that leads inevitably to worship.

The apprehension of the other through contemplation and awe is significant in our consideration of the means of apprehension of the human other, and the deficiency of the apprehension of the synthesised human in a digital context. For now, though, it is important to note the deficiencies of two as the basis of relationships. Two implies one and other; it requires priority and dependency, development and process, presence and absence. Two is simply not adequate to describe how we encounter the world or how we understand God. We cannot imagine the other as present or absent, but only as present, because if the other is absent we cannot apprehend ourselves. In any perception, there is the one, the other and the perception itself.

Merleau-Ponty was reaching for similar language in his late work, especially the posthumously published essay 'The Intertwining'. Here Merleau-Ponty offers a new conception of the body as a 'chiasm' or crossing point between subjective experience

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[186] Lossky, 'God in Trinity', 45.

[187] Lossky, 'God in Trinity', 47.

and objective existence. It shows the ambiguous status of our bodies as both subject and object. This qualifies Merleau-Ponty's earlier view of the priority of the 'phenomenal' subjective body.

In contradiction of Descartes — and of his own earlier thought — he wrote that

> We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only 'shadows stuffed with organs,' that is, more of the visible? The world is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the world ultimately. Instead, body and world are continuous, concentric, each going out toward the other and also folded back on itself.

Merleau-Ponty also increasingly spoke of a congruence between vision and touch, which we will return to later. He wrote that

> Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world […] There is a double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one.

This rejection of Cartesianism has a profound implication for our understanding of digital culture. In the pre-quantum era, digital information is reduced to dualities: a combination of 1s and 0s, presences and absences.[188] This turns out to be a false or at least inadequate basis for the understanding of information related to persons. To suggest that all information can be constituted only of 1s and 0s is to make an idol of it. It suggests that digital information has an impersonal or mystical quality. It neglects the fundamental fact that all information, including digital information, exists in a cultural context. Unlike personhood, digital information is always reducible.

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[188] It seems possible that quantum computing may make it possible for a 1 and a 0 to be simultaneously present. However, this will not remove their essential one-ness or zero-ness. See Frank Arute et al., 'Quantum supremacy using a programmable superconducting processor', *Nature*, 574 (2019), 505–511 *<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-019-1666-5>* [accessed 31 October 2019].

Unattended, uninterpreted computer code is literally meaningless. This external cultural context represents the third party in the 'trinity' of perception. Without a human to decode it (usually through some form of machine), digital information cannot be said to exist at all as information. This most fundamental point about the nature of information will have significant practical and ethical implications in considering the relationship between humans and machines.

For a fuller understanding of this we must press further into Williams' understanding of the nature of Trinity. Augustine saw the Father and the Son both as givers and the Spirit as gift: the Spirit is the eternal gift of the Father to the Son and vice versa, that flowing and pulsing of love one to another in which we are invited to participate. This is not to say, as Aquinas and Augustine emphasised, that the Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son. Father, Son and Spirit are all in their nature love, so "the Father and the Son love each other not by the Holy Spirit, but by their essence", meaning by their divine nature.[189] Following Augustine, "Williams understands God as an infinite ground of objectivity, truthfulness and love. God loves, and this love is so attentive, so objective, that within God there opens up a differentiation: God loves God."[190]

3   Self and others

In 'The Deflections of Desire', Rowan Williams draws on apophatic theology to examine how the relations of divine life undergird the nature of the human person. Father and Son are lover and loved, yet the Trinity is *one* lover, both as subject and object. The purpose of creation is to provide an object for this "dynamic surplus" of love. This is foundational to his apprehension of the Trinity, and consequently to his understanding of humans. "It is the Spirit as excess of divine love that secures the

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[189] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, question 37, article 2, 118.

[190] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2012), 85.

character of God-as-such."[191] That is why Saint Paul says that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."[192] Mike Higton summarises it thus:

> God is nothing other than that life of relation in which the Father eternally loves the Son, and the Son the Father – and in which the Spirit eternally opens that relationship, so that it is ripe for others to be drawn into it.[193]

God's love is, as Williams neatly puts it, God's own life turned outwards.[194]

According to Williams, God loves us creatures "as if we were God." Human persons are not necessary to the loving character of the Trinity, but they are necessarily consequent upon it.

> The single life of the Godhead is the going-out from self-identity into the other; that cannot be a closed mutuality (for then the other would be only the mirror of the same); the love of one for the other must itself open onto a further otherness if it is not to return to the same; and only so is the divine life 'as a whole' constituted as love (rather than mutual reinforcement of identity.)[195]

Sarah Coakley shares Williams' apophatic approach and emphasis on contemplation as the route to approaching the other. She situates gender (which she helpfully refers to as "embodied difference") at the heart of this otherness.

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[191] Rowan Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. by Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118.

[192] Romans 5:5.

[193] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 9.

[194] Rowan Williams, 'Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on De Trinitate', in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. by Bernard Bruning et al. (Louvalin: Leuven University Press, 1990), 321.

[195] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 118.

> Gender matters primarily because it is about differentiated, embodied relationship – first and foremost to God, but also, and from there, to others; and its meaning is therefore fundamentally given in relation to the human's role as made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:26-27)[196]

This differentiation, both between persons and between the individual person and God, will be important later in understanding the nature of human relations as self-giving without recompense. In contrast, the relationship between a human person and a machine is always contractual, because if the machine does not deliver information to the person, the relationship cannot be said to exist. A computer that is not switched on is a mere object.

Coakley emphasises how "the tumultuous obsessions of a secularized and sex-saturated culture, and the current political intensities of debates over gender and same-sex desire"[197] make it imperative to understand human sexual desire in its theological context, as dominant amongst the other human desires. She believes that only divine desire is more fundamental than human sexual desire, and the intricacies of human desire, such as the secular riddle of gender, can only be understood in its connection to a desiring, trinitarian God. Similarly, we can only understand the stature of human desire that is mediated through machines if we do so through the lens of divine desire that is grasped through the human senses.

4   The image of God located in the person

This leads to further reflection on the meaning of the image of God in human persons. In contemporary ecclesiology a great deal of weight is sometimes placed upon the idea of the *imago dei* without a corresponding level of reflection as to what this might

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[196] Sarah Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?', *Criterion,* 47.1 (2009), 9. <https://docshare.tips/gender-and-theology-coakley_57494f41b6d87fda108b4d96.html> [Accessed 14 December 2022].

[197] Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?'*,* 8.

mean. Williams tends to address this question from the human end, beginning with a consideration of humans' experience of consciousness.

Rowan Williams' exposition of the Trinity should not be confused with models of 'social trinity' proposed by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann in *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Such models have been challenged by Stephen Holmes, Karen Kilby and others. Kilby suggests[198] that some theologians, wishing to assert the 'relevance' of the doctrine of the Trinity, have fallen into the trap of projecting upon the godhead a superlative view of human nature and society. On the whole, Rowan Williams avoids this trap. There is always a risk that concepts like 'desire', on which he relies, are necessarily shaped by human experience and should not be naïvely applied to the godhead. This is especially important in seeking to determine moral principles. But Williams is too aware of the mystery of God to fall into that trap.

As we had seen, the foundation of Rowan Williams' theological anthropology is that personhood is irreducible. The fact that we recognise commonality in other persons, but cannot adequately define their personhood in other terms, tells us that personhood is neither a metaphor nor a component, but a fundamental reality. In *Being Human* he writes, with a Cartesian logic, that human consciousness must be real, because when we think about ourselves we cannot be thinking about no-thing.[199] Consciousness is also, and crucially for Williams, discoverable only in relationship. Beyond some generalisations such as body type and shared memory, he says, we struggle to work out what it is that is common between ourselves and others, and it is on that basis of our physical entity that we recognise personhood both in ourselves and others. This personhood is inalienable, even though our attempts to define it are always partial. Animals, for example, are not persons, because I am a person, and animals are not like me. On the other hand, a human individual in a vegetative state remains a person, because I am a person, and I recognise that in significant ways they

[198] Karen Kilby, 'Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity'*, New Blackfriars,* 81, no. 957 (2000), 432–45.

[199] Rowan Williams, *Being Human* (London: SPCK, 2018), 6.

are like me, though separate from me. Out of that recognition I endow the other person with the dignity of personhood. If this feels somewhat inadequate, Williams simply regards it as part of the fundamental mystery of personhood: "the personal is what *discloses* and is disclosed in relation".[200]

This is perhaps best exemplified in the universal desire to be touched by another human. A great many studies in psychology and physiology have demonstrated this need for touch in human development, and the desire for touch in normal socialisation. Three examples will suffice. Ferber, Feldman and Makhoul found that newborn babies require skin-to-skin contact in the first hour after birth to help regulate their temperature, heart rate, and breathing.[201] Carlson and Earls found that the touch-deprived children in understaffed Romanian orphanages developed significantly lower cortisol and growth development levels for their age group.[202] Harlow's and Harlow's infamous experiments on rhesus macaques in the early 1960s[203] graphically illustrate the mammalian desire for touch. Food is a requirement for survival, but touch is what sustains us.

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[200] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 12.

[201] Sari Goldstein Ferber, Ruth Feldman, Imad R. Makhoul, 'The development of maternal touch across the first year of life', *Early Human Development* 84.6, 363-370.

[202] Carlson, M. and Earls, F.,'Psychological and Neuroendocrinological Sequelae of Early Social Deprivation in Institutionalized Children in Romania', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 807, 419-428.

[203] Harlow, H. F. , 'The nature of love', *American Psychologist* 13.12, 673–685. In a series of ethically questionable experiments, Harlow created inanimate surrogate mothers for baby monkeys made from wire and wool. After a while, baby monkeys learned to recognise their fake mothers, and became attached to.

Harlow then presented the young monkeys with two options: a 'mother' made of wire, and a 'mother' wrapped in soft cloth. The wire 'mother' held a bottle with food, but the cloth mother did not. Harlow discovered that the monkeys preferred to spend time with the surrogate mother that provided tactile comfort rather than the one that provided nourishment.

It is in this desire that our personhood is expressed, and it is in the touch of another person that our personhood is contextualised and thereby realised. Earlier we looked at the significance of the mutual touch of a pregnant mother and her foetus as the deep origin of this personhood, and the transition from single to dual personhood.

Though we exist as individuals, Williams says that our consciousness is located. In other words, we discover ourselves in a context — what he calls "the zero-point of orientation".[204] We know ourselves where and when we are, and we know where and when we are as it is reflected to us by whatever is nearby but separate from us. Our consciousness is necessarily relational, and it is this that makes our existence personal rather than merely individual. We are incapable of thinking of ourselves without understanding ourselves in relation to others, and even our bodies are only knowable and comprehensible because we discover they are known and comprehended by others. I am defined by the gap between me and that which is not me. In due course I will consider the unique role that is played by touch in this separation and consequent mutual self-understanding. For now, it is enough to know that we are surrounded by things that are signalling to us, notably other persons who are like our selves but different. To be conscious of oneself as a body is to be aware of other peoples' consciousness in a way that, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, is at once mobile, engaged, incomplete, empathetic.[205]

This 'co-consciousness' is evidenced in our awareness of continuous narrative. We are aware that we have both a storied past and an imagined future: we are narrators of our lives and of our experiences of the world, but we are also narrated by others. We have history, but we are also components in the histories of others. These interacting histories are made accessible and comprehensible by a shared language of words, actions, and symbols that we can use to effect change in others, or that can be used to effect change upon us. In short, each of us has a presence in the life of others, and we

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[204] Williams, *Being Human*, 11.

[205] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 369-375.

know ourselves only in the mirror they hold up to us. "I'm neither a machine nor a self-contained soul," Williams writes. "I'm a person because I am spoken to, I'm attended to, and I'm spoken and attended and loved into actual existence."[206] So:

> human personality, [is] fascinatingly and inescapably a hybrid reality: material embedded in the material world, subject to the passage of time, and yet mysteriously able to respond to its environment so as to make a different environment; 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 about.[207]

This is the key to Williams' understanding of the *imago dei*. I am human because I, located in space and time, find myself loved. The metaphor that Williams repeatedly reaches for is being *held in the loving gaze of God*. This love makes "no distinctions between people more worthy and people less worthy of love, no distinctions of race, religion, age, innocence, strength, or beauty: a lavish and indiscriminate love".[208] The turn from contemplation to worship is swift and inevitable. "Face to face with Jesus, there and only there, do we find who we are. We have been created to mirror his life, the eternal life of the one turned always towards the overflowing love of the Father […] When we look at Jesus, we see in some measure what he sees, and are drawn to where his eyes lead us."[209] The inclusivity of this vision makes it, in the words of Mike Higton, a difficult gospel.

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[206] Williams, *Being Human*, 45.

[207] Williams, *Being Human*, 45.

[208] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 2.

[209] Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 78.

Rowan Williams' adoption of a personalist, rather than individualist, anthropology places a great weight on the holistic nature of the human being. Williams' assumption is that the person is the irreducible unit of humanity. Neither body nor soul, neither intellect nor character, can be said to have an existence other than as a part of the whole person. The use of terms like soul, spirit or mind to identify what is supposed to locate the hidden reality of being human in the phenomenon of mental awareness, is a misleading objectification. That person-ality is indivisible is, for Williams, a tenet of Christian theology.

Of course, this implies that personhood is inseparable from embodiment. All that pertains to a body, its materiality, and its physiology, including its sense perceptions, are integral to personhood. Oliver O'Donovan deals with this in his 1994 essay 'Keeping Body and Soul Together'.[210] O'Donovan was building on and responding to the unitary view of human nature espoused by Paul Ramsey.[211] Ramsey maintains the co-inherence of body and soul on the basis of a Christian humanism, leading him to reject the fear of death and the notion of an enduring soul. In his article, O'Donovan attempts a judo throw on Ramsey's unitary view by reinserting resurrection, the theological touchstone which he feels Ramsey has consciously excluded.

O'Donovan argues that

> the principle of psychosomatic unity […] has no *free-standing* authority for Christian thought, but rides on the principle that the resurrection of Christ is central to Christian faith, and the resurrection of all mankind to

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[210] Oliver O'Donovan, 'Keeping Body and Soul Together', in *On Moral Medicine* 3rd edn., ed. by M. Therese Lysaught and Joseph J. Kotva, Jr. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012), 1053–1064.

[211] Paul Ramsey, 'Preface to *The Patient as Person*' and 'The Indignity of "Death with Dignity"', in *On Moral Medicine,* ed. by Lysaught and Kotva, 337–340 and 1043–1052.

Christian hope. It is in this context that the Christian will want to give assent to the saying, 'Embodiment is the end of all God's works'.[212]

Psycho-somatic unity, which is also central to Williams' thinking, will be a key element in developing a theology of touch for a digital world. What a person is, is inseparable from what, when and where their body is.

Thus far at least, Williams' ontology meshes fairly comfortably with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. Personhood not only inheres in embodiment, but is sensed and known in embodiment. It is on that basis of our physical entity that we recognise personhood both in ourselves and others.

Discussions about how the senses can be differentiated, physiologically or perceptually, become less critical if we accept that it is the embodied person as a whole that is the sensing entity. Touch has a significant role in harmony with all other means of sensory perception because they are all functions of the one entity that is the whole person. Phrases like 'I feel it in my soul' or 'I see it in my mind's eye' make sense as complex analogies for a whole person's encounter with the whole world through complex and interwoven sensations.

There is more to be said about the way the embodied self meets, recognises and engages with that which is other than itself. But for now we note that the awareness of embodied personhood is the clearest indication for humans of their individuation, rather than the other way around. I know that I am an individual, separate from other individuals and from the world, because I know where my body ends; where it meets resistance from the external universe. And I know this first and foremost through resistance, the sensation of touch. Touch is the primary means by which an embodied person distinguishes themselves from what is other. I know that I am I, because I know

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[212] O'Donovan, 'Keeping Body and Soul Together', 1061. The quotation is a saying of the eighteenth century theologian F. C. Oetinger, later taken up by Jürgen Moltmann in *God in Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 244–275.

that I am here; and I know that I am here because I know that you are not here, in the place and time that I am occupying.

Rowan Williams wants to move us beyond the sense of wonder that we are here, to the far greater wonder that we are not alone. Touch is one of the primary means by which we recognise that what might be just a collection of resistant cells is in fact another person who is like me, but separate from me. This movement, of self recognising other and other recognising self, is finely paralleled in Merleau-Ponty's notion of chiasm, which he explored through the notion of two hands touching each other. One person sees, touches and recognises an other, and in the same moment is seen, touched and recognised by the other. The person who has reached out knows for certain that the other they have touched is not a glass mirror, because they know what it feels like to touch themselves, and the touch of a glass mirror is not the same.

In *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty seemed to be struggling to express this, reaching for terms like chiasm or 'folding back'. Williams recognises this meeting as a moment of spiritual significance, which could imply that the term sacrament might be appropriate. Williams also contributes a number of further observations about the conditions that make such a meeting possible. First, an other can only be apprehended through awe. This awe might apply to the general state of recognising oneself as being alive in the tangible world. It may be generated through a variety of senses: the sound of a symphony orchestra, the taste of honey, or the sight of a sunset over the Blue Mountains. But the awe is particularly acute when it is the result of touching another person who is recognised as like yourself. Seeing a loved one or hearing their voice might produce something of this awe, but they are both one-directional experiences. The reciprocal nature of touch gives a uniqueness to the experience. As you touch another person, they touch you, and both experience resistance. In this act of resistance played out in time and space both parties are inevitably changed. This implies more than a mechanical understanding of touch – and therefore an understanding that is beyond replication by a machine.

The bi-directional nature of touch means that it is both expressive and receptive. More than any of the other senses, touch is inevitably a vehicle of two-way communication. Willingly or unwillingly, the nature of touch between persons involves self-giving; a surrender of some space and agency. Even an accidental brush against another person on a crowded tube train cannot be without cultural meaning for those who are conscious of it. How much more, then, an unmediated act of sexual intercourse. This kind of mutual recognition of personhood clearly does not occur in the same way where one person touches an object such as a machine. In that instance, the touch is functional, but it is unlikely to be freighted with awe or to involve meaningful sacrifice.

6   Identity and accountability

In his 1989 lecture 'On Being Creatures',[213] Williams explores the uncomfortable relationship between creatureliness and security. "The secret of understanding our createdness is that it makes both sense and nonsense of the 'search for identity': it justifies our need (i.e. it displays it as something other than a neutral fact) and it answers it. Before we are looked at, spoken to, acted on, we *are* because of the look, the word, the act of God."[214] This evidences a crucial distinction between creator and creation, and subsequently between humans and their culture, which has always been essential in Christian understanding of art, and which becomes yet more important in digital culture when the prospect of 'the singularity'[215] appears to offer a vision of a

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[213] Rowan Williams, 'On Being Creatures', The Fourth Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture, 1989, in Williams, *On Christian Theology*.

[214] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 72.

[215] 'The singularity' (or 'the technological singularity') is a term coined by the cryptologist Irving Good in 'Speculations Concerning the First Ultraintelligent Machine', *Advances in Computers*, 6 (1965), 31-85. It describes an imagined moment in the future when computers have the capacity to develop and reproduce themselves without human intervention. At this point, human development crosses over from being primarily biological to being primarily mechanical; technological development is irreversible and beyond human control. It represents a fundamental change in the

new form of creation ex nihilo. The difficulty for digital culture in the concept of createdness lies in the degree of dependency thus constructed. In digital culture the self-directed, autonomous individual is an aim; in Williams' theology it is a blasphemy.

For Williams there is no 'essence' of person. Humanness is not individual wholeness, but is found where we bleed into the lives of others. As a result Christianity can only be discovered in practice, and can only be practiced in action.[216] In this, Williams draws on Wittgenstein, who was influential in his earliest development in Swansea in the 1960s. Wittgenstein maintained that meaning is produced only in specific contexts of social interaction.[217] According to Williams a person cannot rightly love themself without knowing themselves loved. Neither can a person wholly absolve themself, because their experience and actions are lodged in the narrative of others. An individual's past, their history, their story, does not belong exclusively to them as an individual. They may try to reorder it but they cannot control it. A person cannot wholly know their self except in the reception of another's knowledge of them.

One consequence is that healing cannot be wholly about a person finding peace with themselves, because no one is alone in their joys or their sorrows. Even to attempt such independence is a form of blasphemy. An 'inner life' without accountability to the perception of others is risky. This is a counter-cultural position in digital culture, where individual 'authenticity' is often deemed a moral goal, even if it is divorced from embodied personhood. For Williams, mere sincerity does not represent an adequate ethic.

Williams worries about this disjuncture. "What happens to our sense of the human when it is divorced from a grasp of the self as something realised in time?", he asks in

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place of human beings in the created order — the end of the 'human era' in world history.

[216] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2012), 17.

[217] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 501.

Lost Icons.[218] "A culture which tolerates the loss of a sense of damage to the moral identity, the loss of shame or remorse, is bound to be one that dangerously overplays the role of the will in the construction of human persons."[219] The ethical implications of this will become clearer in the final chapter, when we consider the implications of the collapse of context (i.e., location in history and geography) in digital space. In particular, we will need to consider what happens to the moral significance of human sex in digital culture, where it can be divorced from time and place, for example by digital pornography.

Rowan Williams' understanding of the priority of relationality in the construction of personhood is not uncontested. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, has a less boundaried approach to the constitution of the person, describing the post-human as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction".[220] And Donna Haraway is wary that apophatic ontology may be exploitative, devaluing the individual and creating non-beings, a "self-who-is-not".[221] She questions whether we should necessarily conceive of our bodies as ending at the skin, or at best including other beings encapsulated by our skin. In particular, she asks why women should be defined solely in relation to the desire of men, or people of colour in relation to their non-whiteness. All of this raises the question of whether, and in what sense, skin (which is the sense organ of touch) is a definitive boundary of the human person.

In Williams' thinking, the prime casualty of individualism is the distinction between humans and God, and consequently between God's creation and human culture. God

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[218] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2000), 6.

[219] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 125.

[220] Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago, II: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

[221] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 159.

creates identity, and humans subsequently create culture. Williams calls it a "bizarre distortion" to think that we are imitating God in the exploitative mastery of our own creativity, since unlike the human artist, God gives freely without dominating.[222] It is a serious error for a person to think that they can create a (digital) identity with the status of a person, when in fact what they are creating is a cultural artefact, even if in its digital realisation that artefact has many of the superficial characteristics of a person, such as language or appearance. Above all, what an artefact cannot do is to love or to know itself loved. God alone can create a person, and God alone does not need to discover identity in relationship, because that relationship is essential to God in Trinity.

7   Identity in relation

In essence, Williams describes human encounter in terms of the mutual recognition of desire and love. Without engagement with the other I can't know myself. Knowing is a cooperative enterprise. I cannot know myself alone, just as I cannot learn a language without being spoken to. It is this knowing and being known, he says, that enables consciousness and determines our status as persons.

A key metaphor for Williams in the formation of identity is adulthood. Childhood is to be cherished. It is a protected space in which humans should not be faced with choices that call on their desires, such as consumerism or sexual expression. The adult 'real' world provides the secure context for the child's experimental world.

However, childhood ought to be temporary. Moving from childhood — growing into adulthood — is a matter of inhabiting our own flesh and taking responsibility for our desires. "Adulthood […] is a matter of the right functioning of desire."[223] For example, it is perfectly normal for a baby or young child to express desire by crying, but for an

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[222] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 76.

[223] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 92.

adult, crying over the deprivation of physical comfort or material satisfaction is usually a sign of immaturity. "The self becomes adult and truthful in being faced with the incurable character of its desire."[224] There's a necessary distance between adult and non-adult desire.

The intrinsic relationality in the status of the adult human is crucial to Williams' anthropology. Becoming an adult human is "Thinking one's own reality through the medium of another's history, seeing oneself in the other."[225] This is a task that cannot be achieved quickly or painlessly. "Talking about human beings in the context of conversational relation takes it for granted that human subjects are *difficult,* complex, that understanding calls for time."[226] Nor is it unproblematic. It is "the painful forging of a shared world".[227] Sexual intimacy has a unique role in the process of adulting as "the place where [we] begin to be taught whatever maturity [we] have".[228]

The notion of interdependence in consciousness has immediate ethical implications. In due course we will see how digital culture places the individual at the zero axis of time and space, the centre of significance. Drawing on Richard Sennett,[229] Williams suggests that when a human being sees himself or herself as the absolute centre of their own narrative, the instinctive (and appropriate) response of that person will be to seek to control others, the environment, and themselves. "Oppression is a situation where people don't talk to each other; where people don't find each other difficult."[230]

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[224] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 153.

[225] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 140.

[226] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 138.

[227] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 151.

[228] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 313.

[229] Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Co-operation* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

[230] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 138.

Williams draws on Gillian Rose's writing on the Palestinian conflict as archetypical of "a schism between my moral awareness, my scrutiny of myself as (more or less) self-determining, self-forming, agent, and my political location as a subject involved in processes beyond my control, processes for which I can disclaim responsibility".[231] Christianity shouldn't keep people as children. Human maturity, he says, lies in "being daily grasped in […] helplessness".[232] Reconciliation and maturity comes from "Thinking one's own reality through the medium of another's history, seeing oneself in the other."[233] The opposite is what St Paul calls the flesh (*sarx*), "a word that describes human life minus relationship […] Flesh is human life somehow alienated, cut off from its environment, cut off from that life of spirit which, in St Paul's usage, is always about relation."[234]

As a poet, Williams has a strong focus on words, images and symbols as the language of this recognition.

> We learn what we are in language and culture – even what we physically are. What I feel is structured by how I have learned to talk; what I want is what I picture to myself in the images I have learned to form from the observation of others, images that are not innocent representations of objects and goals but complex, differentiated constructions existing in potentially tense relation with the world of other subjects.[235]

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[231] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 152–3, drawing on Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford; Blackwell, 1993), 36.

[232] Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 10.

[233] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 140.

[234] Rowan Williams, *The Theology of Health and Healing,* Hildegard Lecture, Thirsk (2003) <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2111/the-theology-of-health-and-healing-hildegard-lecture-thirsk> [accessed 1 October 2019].

[235] Williams, *Lost Icons,* 174.

I suggest that Williams might accept the giving and receiving of touch (or the lack of it) as a language of equal significance to words or sight in the constitution of personhood-in-relationship.

In digital culture we are confronted with a tsunami of words, images and symbols, and more often than not they are synthesised, disembodied and stripped of much or all of their context. The sheer volume of content, and the fineness of the reproduction, makes it very difficult to distinguish authenticity from synthesis — if indeed such a distinction is appropriate. As a person like myself, your view of me is fundamental to my self-understanding. But in a digital context, how do I know who you are, or indeed whether you are a person at all?

> The urgent issue is how we speak truthfully of a material life that includes among its material activities a self-representation in the community of other speakers, a material life that somehow represents the duration in which it lives.[236]

Williams recognises this as a significant problem of the digital age.

8   Desire is triangular

René Girard spoke similarly of "the mimetic character of desire", suggesting that human desire is "triangular", meaning that it arises not from any intrinsic value in the object of desire, but rather that we imitate others and experience desire for the same things that they desire. The toddler wanting the toy that another toddler has; the junior executive wanting the same clothes, car and corner office that the senior executive has; the lover pining for the same beloved as a rival — these are all experiences of this triangulation of desire. We learn what we want by looking around at what others want. The saints and mystics teach us another way, a way of rejecting such false desires in order to discover a wellspring of authentic desire rooted in God. Williams suggests that a conversion of the heart means rejecting a false triangulation

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[236] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 169.

of desire (me, a rival, and an object of competition) for a new triangulation: God, the poor, and my deepest self.

Williams' understanding of the Trinity meets his understanding of consciousness discovered in relationship in this notion of the reflexivity of desire.

> To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned, or are learning, about being the object of the causeless, loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's Child.[237]

Sarah Coakley describes "the ontological twoness of God and the world" as "more fundamental even than the twoness of gender".[238] This twoness is subject to the "interruptive transfiguration" of Christ, and yet crucially it endures. "A fundamental line of ontological difference [...] has been crossed and overcome in the Incarnation, yet also not obliterated".[239]

Coakley joins Williams in regarding the reception of God's desire as foundational for personhood.

> Not only is divine desire more fundamental than human sexual desire, because it is its ultimate incubus, source and refiner; but also, and by the same token, that same divine desire is more fundamental than gender.[240]

It is worth noting that both Coakley and Williams' dependence on a binary construction is subject to challenge by those whose understanding of genders is more

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[237] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 312.

[238] Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?', 10.

[239] Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?', 10.

[240] Coakley, 'Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?', 8.

fluid. In this work from 2009 Coakley leans heavily on the notion of "gendered twoness" which is transformed by the "interruptive transfiguration" of the incarnation of Christ. This assumption seems to depend on a biological and therefore essentially binary model of gender. It is not clear whether this notion would be sustainable if we were to contemplate a more diverse, social model of multiple genders. She explores this more disrupted model in her 2013 book *God, Sexuality and the Self.*[241]

Within the Godhead, as we have noted, "The love of the Son for the Father is itself a desire for the desire of the Father".[242] The same overflow of love catches up the human person, so that "God loves creatures gratuitously and selflessly; his love draws them into their true flourishing: a life of selfless and gratuitous love coming to fruition in them in endlessly new ways."[243] This results in "a three-cornered relation"[244] between God, Godself in Christ, and the human person. In the next chapter I will explore what these insights might be applied to the nature of touch, and particularly sexual touch.

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[241] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[242] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 119 (after St John of the Cross).

[243] Higton, *A Difficult Gospel*, 9.

[244] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 189.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOVING TOUCH

> There is no goodness that is not bodily and realistic and local.
>
> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*[245]

Touch in the context of sex

In the last chapter I offered an overview of the theological anthropology of Rowan Williams: his understanding of how we recognise our personhood in relation to others and to God. In this chapter I will look at how this understanding cashes out in relation to touch, and specifically sexual touch. I will begin to explore what this might mean when applied to sexual interactions between a person and a machine.

1   Deflection into the excess of love — an apophatic theology of sex

Rowan Williams' lecture 'The Body's Grace'[246] was written in what Myers identifies as the first of Williams' three broad periods of exploration. This first period, according to Myers, was dominated by the Wittgensteinian question of the relation between language and sociality. In exploring contested ground in this lecture, he was walking a difficult path between pastor and theologian, which became even more challenging when he later became Archbishop of Canterbury. Shortly before 'The Body's Grace', Pope John Paul II had completed his five-year series of addresses on the Epistle to the Ephesians, which were published as his *Theology of the Body*. In the talks, John Paul II spoke of marriage as an analogy for the gift of 'spousal' love between God and humankind. He suggested that sex receives its justification by analogy with the love that God has for humans. Williams offered a similar argument, but he altered the dynamic. Where the Pope had argued that sexual relations are modelled on the nature

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[245] Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes* (Oxford: Lion, 2003), 90.

[246] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 309–320.

of God, Williams wanted to say almost the reverse — that wherever there is good sex, God's nature is revealed. This is what he called 'the body's grace' — the gift through which another person shows us that God loves us, as God loves God. In the lecture, Williams recognised the cultural (as opposed to purely ecclesiological) nature of sex, so that this grace can be found anywhere, between any people, provided the interaction is authentic. John Paul II's appeal to Natural Law sees the dynamic from God to humans, so it is the goodness of God's love that validates human sexuality — and that means it is restricted to that which expresses the nature of God's love expressed in creation, meaning that authentic sexual expression must be heterosexual, covenanted and potentially generative.

In contrast, Williams sought to go beyond conservative appeals to nature, gender essentialism and Scripture to explore the 'inner logic' of sex. This is attractive because of its analogy to incarnation, and its embracing of the pain, limitation and even the frustration of sex, which is often overlooked in conservative ethics. In summary, Williams' position was that sexual expression, when it is authentic, has grace at its core. It is an act of mutual self-giving in which we discover ourselves to be desirable in the eyes of another, and in that experience find a revelation of God's own nature and God's desire for us. Sex is analogous to the love of God in Christ. It is the embodiment of grace. Sex "involves a desire that one's partner be aroused by the recognition of one's desire that he or she be aroused".[247]

Williams writes of being in love as an intensification of the sense of *me* and also of what is *not* me. It is "the moment of acknowledged conviction, shared by two people, that each is accepted, given time and room, treated not as an object of desire alone but as a focus for attention and clarification".[248] There is an intense vulnerability about it — a teetering between egotism and self-denial.

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[247] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 312.

[248] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 193.

It is precisely the limitation of the fusion of embodied selves that is the analogy for the union of persons in the flesh. It is the constraints of embodiment, explored to their limits in the tragi-comical limitations of human sex which, like Godself, can only be properly apprehended as mystery. "Think of marriage:" Myers writes, "there is no one more mysterious than a spouse – not because they are distant and unfamiliar, but because they are so near and so well known."[249] Williams' theology of sex can properly be described as apophatic and in this way sex is akin to worship — the awe and mystery that follows from the contemplation of the unattainable other. It is also eschatological, in that the resolution we are promised is a new body that can be fully united with God and with one another, so that Jesus can say to the Sadducees that "at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven".[250]

In his 2011 essay 'The Ecclesiastical Body's Grace',[251] Mike Higton reflects on Rowan Williams' early writing on sexuality as a paradigm for thinking about the church. In 'The Body's Grace', Williams makes it clear that he regards desire as paradigmatic of the human relationship with God.

> The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity.[252]

Indeed, Williams says that human beings are created precisely so that they may be caught up in this cycle of desire and response, and in so being, may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God. He goes on

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[249] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 4.

[250] Matthew 22:30.

[251] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 7–28.

[252] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 311–312.

to suggest that the central role of the *ecclesia* is to teach us how to live in the light of this.

> The life of the Christian community has as its rationale —if not invariably its practical reality —the task of teaching us to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.[253]

It is in the exercise of the ecclesial community that humans learn what it is to be loved ceaselessly and without cause. Here too, we learn about the nature of God, through experiencing God's love for God. This occurs as we take on the identity of children of God, within the community of God's Spirit.

Lest it should appear that God might depend on humans to realise this goal within God's own creation, Higton emphasises the non-contingency of God in Williams' thinking.

> Williams insists over and over again in his work that God has no need of anything other than God to be God – and that God's love can be always and only a free gift, utterly directed to the true flourishing of its recipients, never a matter of God pursuing God's own benefit.[254]

Higton then draws on Williams' theology to examine the economy of the Trinity:

> God is nothing other than that life of relation in which the Father eternally loves the Son, and the Son the Father – and in which the Spirit eternally opens that relationship, so that it is ripe for others to be drawn into it.[255]

He moves on to apply that to the generative relationship between God and humans. God loves us creatures 'as if we were God'.[256]

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[253] Williams, 'The Body's Grace'*,* 311–312.

[254] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 9.

[255] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 9.

[256] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 313.

> God loves creatures gratuitously and selflessly; his love draws them into their true flourishing: a life of selfless and gratuitous love coming to fruition in them in endlessly new ways.[257]

Higton uses this dynamic to explore the part that sex plays in forming the body of Christ in love.

> There are patterns of sexual relationship that help untwist for us such open delight, just as there are most certainly patterns that coil us more deeply into the sinful incurvature of the self.[258]

As our love for God is deflected into the excess of desire of God's own love, so there is a link between the currency of love and desire, and the currency of communication and understanding. Language and love intertwine, and sex is a language in which we can speak most profoundly of desire.

Andrew Cameron, in his critique of Williams' 'The Body's Grace', takes issue, not with the substance of this, but with Williams' limited application of it. According to Cameron, Williams seems to suggest that no other aspect of sexual 'nature' is relevant apart from mutual desire.[259] Cameron feels that there are other valid aspects of 'nature' such as gender complementarity and procreative potential to which Williams has given insufficient weight. It is true that Williams passes quite easily from procreativity to a more generalised concept of generativity, without perhaps accounting for the specifics of conception and childbirth. He also chooses not to address the physical differences between male and female.

A not dissimilar critique comes from Roman Catholic philosopher Alexander Pruss. He argues that 'desire' is an unreliable category, not congruent with libido, and risks

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[257] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 9.

[258] Higton, 'The Ecclesial Body's Grace', 10

[259] Cameron, 'Desire and Grace', 141–162.

bypassing the realities of physical difference and complementarity. "The biological nature of the sexual act makes it fit for interpersonal union, and the specific kind of interpersonal union in which sexuality results requires this biological nature",[260] he writes.

In 'The Body's Grace', however, Williams was focussing on the broader meanings of sexual desire. He seems to be aware that he is focussing on a particular aspect of the *imago dei* when he writes that:

> There is plenty that is paradoxical about all this – and it is formidably easy to sentimentalise. But the truth is clearly that in the relations we designate as 'being in love', the urge for sexual gratification is blended with a range of other affects and concerns that enable the subject to speak and see himself or herself afresh.[261]

For Williams and Higton (as for Barth[262]) all of this is couched in the language of speech. Sex is a proclamation of the gospel. But given that touch is a primary mode of communication in sex, it is strange that it is largely overlooked in their writing. Both Williams and Higton skate over the obvious fact that the body's grace is embodied, so that in sex, the gospel is always proclaimed by touch and the reception of touch, and only secondarily by words and hearing, seeing and being seen. Williams complains, in 'The Body's Grace', that there isn't much about sex in the New Testament, beyond a sense that it is an area of moral gravity. But that is to miss out the main point, which is that the New Testament is all about touch — the touch of God.

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[260] Alexander R. Pruss, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 6.

[261] Williams, *Lost Icons,* 191.

[262] For example, in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol.1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, part 1,* ed. by G.F. Bromiley and T.F. Torrence (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 188.

2   Good sex/bad sex

Rowan Williams' sexual ethic is rooted in relationship. In short, we are not called to follow a set of rules, but to show each other the character of God. He asks how we can "act in such a way that what results is glory – the radiating, the visibility of God's beauty in the world?".[263] Our actions should be directed to the bettering of the Body of Christ, and where possible to recognise the actions of others as gifts to the Body. In this way "Sex can be […] something which reflects and draws us into the self-giving vulnerability of love, which mirrors the life of God."[264] The biological drive means that I may desire someone, but "for that desire to be fulfilled, the other person has to recognize that I desire them, and has to welcome that desire, and desire me in return".[265] So

> Sexual love becomes sacramental when it involves a lasting […] resignation of control, a yielding to the other, a putting your own body at the disposal of another for that other's life and joy.[266]

Sex is a way in which we are taught to know ourselves as loved by God, and so are freed to love as God loves. Williams draws on Thomas Nagel, who wrote in 'Sexual Perversion' of the escalation of desire back and forth — a mutual mirroring-in-difference — between 'Romeo and Juliet' until it is impossible to tell where it is coming from.[267] The comparison with Merleau-Ponty's image of two hands touching is striking.

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[263] Rowan Williams, 'Making Moral Decisions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Robin Gill, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7.

[264] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 317.

[265] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 141.

[266] Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, 2nd edn. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2014), 164.

[267] Thomas Nagel, 'Sexual Perversion', *The Journal of Philosophy,* 66.1 (Jan. 16 1969), 5–17.

By contrast, this is what Williams defines as self-centred sex:

> If you treat the analytical relationship as the provision of saving knowledge to a diseased mind, or if you treat the erotic relationship as a means for assuring relief of tension and a determinate set of satisfactions, what is lost in both cases is that vision of the self as not there to be possessed, to be completed or to serve another's completion; the vision of the self that is gratuitous or contingent in respect of any other's need, anyone else's agenda, and that therefore demands time, words, patience.[268]

What is lost is the soul —

> a whole way of speaking, of presenting and "uttering" the self, that presupposes relation as the ground that gives the self room to exist, a relation developing in time, a relation with an agency that addresses or summons the self, but is itself no part of the system of interacting and negotiating speakers in the world.[269]

Self-gratification is the very definition of sin. It is a matter of idolatry, since the gifts of God are subordinated, turned into gifts for the self, which is the essence of sin, occurring when (as the Book of Common Prayer has it) "We have followed too much the devices [wilful intentions] and desires of our own hearts."[270] Williams thinks Nagel doesn't make sense without grace. This escalating pattern of grace is in no way 'natural', but can be explained with reference to sanctification.

Bad sex is when the other is reduced to an object for my gratification — or indeed when my own body is reduced to an object for my gratification. Williams draws on Augustine's distinction between use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*).[271] Use is about possession — we use things in an attempt to satisfy our own desires and needs. God

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[268] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 196.

[269] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 196.

[270] From the General Confession, *Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[271] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* I.4, ed. and trans. by R. P. Green (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).

alone can be truly enjoyed, and can truly enjoy us, because God alone has no need of us. Sex modelled on the economy of the Trinity is the nearest humans get to being able to 'enjoy' another being. Later we will note that sex with a machine cannot fulfil this criterion, as it can only ever be a relationship of utility.

In 'The Body's Grace', Williams wrote that

> in sexual relation I am no longer in charge of what I am…I cannot of myself satisfy my wants without distorting or trivialising them. But here we have a particularly intense case of the helplessness of the ego alone.[272]

As a consequence, Williams thinks that "in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is itself a 'perversion'",[273] whereas homosexual sex, which can have no procreative purpose outside of itself, might actually be the gold standard. Good sex, he says, happens best in faithful, publicly committed relationships. Marriage is the risk of passionate engagement. But that doesn't mean that every other form of sex is bad. Crucially, he believes that sex may be good without being tied to procreation.[274]

3   Sex and tragedy

The central dilemma in sexual encounter, for Williams, is an intensification of the central dilemma of all human relationships: how can persons who are separate (and therefore different, whether in gender or otherwise) know one another? The understanding of deflected desire outlined above leads him to think that it is only the difference between persons that makes knowledge possible, since if there is no difference, there is no community, only homogeneity. Conversely, if there is an

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[272] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 313.

[273] Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 62.

[274] Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 147.

absolute difference (such as the difference between a person and a non-person) there is no community, only a collection of entities. Williams looks for a third way, where identity is created and preserved in the process of struggle to sustain difference and unity. This struggle, and its penultimate tragedy, is instantiated in sexual intercourse.

In the early 1990s, Williams was critical of the absolute idealism of Hegel, who suggested that that God might ultimately sublate all differences into himself. Thereafter, he was influenced by Gillian Rose, who resisted interpretations of Hegel as a teleological destroyer of boundaries, but also resisted the French postmodern ethics of the other taking over from the self. Rose argued for struggling to maintain the flawed, broken middle.[275] We don't evade opposition or accept it, but continue to struggle with it. Williams applied this to a model of church life as struggle,[276] and also to human intercourse as the dynamic giving and receiving of self in the never-resolved struggle for *homoousia*. Engagement comes in the form of *kenosis* — the divestment of self to make way for the transcendent other — with each person not pursuing their own interests, but a wider vision of social good which is the only good. Myers describes this as "a tragic shadow" because "the distance between myself and another is never overcome, but only reasserted and sustained".[277] The underlying metaphor here is of trauma, which Williams came to understand through a Freudian lens.

> Religion attempts to deal with the powerlessness of the human subject; but rather than being itself a means of empowerment, it projects unrestricted power onto an alien reality and fixes the self in a

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[275] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

[276] When Williams was Archbishop of Canterbury this stance was frequently misconstrued as indecisive, for example by Stephen Glover in 'An Unworldly and Vague Archbishop Obsessed by Liberal Causes', *The Daily Mail*, 16 March 2012.

[277] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 55. Note that in his review of Myers' book in the *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 1.2 (2015), 791–794, Khegan M Delport is anxious to emphasise that Williams is not claiming that the internal life of the Trinity is an ongoing tragedy.

permanent state of impotence and alienation. Power (divine power) is accessible only through self-abasement and self-devaluing.[278]

Like belief in God, sex is both terrible and wonderful. It is a wound that can never fully heal; a thirst that can never be fully slaked. The kenosis of Christian sociality means not that we should go about saying 'no' to who we really are, but that "each self hears its 'yes' from the other and not from its own depths".[279]

In erotic love, what I can understand of myself becomes one flesh with what you can understand of yourself. The limitation of this understanding is what places the limits on our 'one-fleshness' with another person, so that sex, like all relationships, is a quest for unity, the non-existent third term that will always be beyond reach. Sex is therefore tragic, in that the quest for physical unity between two separately embodied humans is biologically destined for failure. Only bodies that were somehow able to overcome the bounds of physicality could achieve the goal of oneness.

The quest itself — which we commonly call marriage — is an unbounded, covenanted and yet ultimately futile commitment to seek actual unity. At a climactic moment in the creation narrative in Genesis 2:24, the text says that "a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh". Much has been made of this in Christian social ethics, with the suggestion that it is definitive for heterosexual marriage. Pruss suggests that although two people cannot become physically one unit, a male and a female can become biologically joined, and that reproductive sex is the archetype of this union.[280]

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[278] Rowan Williams, 'Freudian Psychology', in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), 220.

[279] Rowan Williams, *A Margin of Silence: The Holy Spirit in Russian Orthodox Theology* (Québec: Éditions dus Lys Vert, 2008), 31.

[280] Pruss, *One Body*, 95-102.

My own understanding is that what humans desire is personal, not physical union. And yet of course 'becoming one flesh' is exactly what two people do not and cannot do, at least not wholly and permanently. Perhaps there is an element of irony in the very suggestion. Or perhaps it is intentionally prefiguring an eschatological oneness that will be available only to a post-resurrection body.

The significance of this will become clear in a later chapter, when I will argue that one of the distinctions between plain human touch, whether sexual or otherwise, and mechanically synthesised touch, is that whilst two machines that meet each other cannot avoid becoming effectively one machine, when two people meet each other, the quest and desire for physical unity can never be wholly fulfilled.

This is a practical outworking of Williams' understanding of the trinitarian theology of St John of the Cross. Just as the Son "must love the excess of the Father's love, that which escapes being a mirror of his own identity",[281] so the recognition of difference between any two humans must not be allowed to become static. It is dynamic and generative, even though it is penultimately tragic. In *Deflections of Desire,* he writes that "To start with [i.e., prior to the transformation of grace], my self is determined by what I want, and that wanting determines and limits who I am. The self I am aware of is a self bound to gratification by means of eros terminating in this or that object."[282]

This leads to the dissolution of selfhood, the Dark Night. The model for this is the dereliction of Jesus on the cross. The Son reaches out to the Father, but remains unconsoled. Sex is, in fact, a profound act of contemplation, a little crucifixion. The other cannot gratify, cannot be grasped, just as "to be included in the love of the Son for the Father is to participate in a love without satisfaction or closure – an endless love".[283] Perhaps this is why so many songs about human love dwell on heartbreak,

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[281] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 121–2.

[282] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 120.

[283] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 121.

not on fulfilment. Refusal to accept the separateness of the other is the first sin both in theology and in ethics. The second is to give up on the generative struggle to achieve unity in difference. Myers writes that

> Authentic social exchange occurs wherever different persons mediate meaning to one another […] For Williams, truth is that new thing that emerges into being when different selves engage in the hard work of sustaining their differences.[284]

There is always a way out of any relationship, and that way out is to go further in. The amplification of the self displaces the self. In truthful encounter, the ego is both enlarged and deposed.

In *Tokens of Trust,* Williams uses the analogy of a musician in performance, who gives themselves over wholly but never completely to the vision of the composer.[285] Typically, Williams describes in this passage how he is stimulated by the *sight* of this relationship being played out, by watching Jacqueline du Pre playing Elgar, or by the image of a singer projected onto a big screen. We might usefully extend the analogy to the *tactile* relationship between a violinist and their violin. The two become as one, and yet remain separate, to the extent that we might easily catch ourselves imagining that at exactly the same time that the person is playing the violin, the violin is playing the person.

Sex within this kenotic mindset is tragic, in that the desire for unity can never be fully realised. "I cease to be an object in which desire can be once and for all terminated."[286] And yet, paradoxically, this tragedy is fulfilling and liberating, because what is lovable in me is not my lovableness, but my lovingness. When it comes to

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[284] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 54.

[285] Williams, *Tokens of Trust* (London: Canterbury, 2007), 73–4.

[286] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 130.

human expression, perversely (in relation to most Christian ethics), desire seeks to set the other free to love beyond itself and me. Love finds satisfaction in the liberation of the other.

> The covenant of erotic faithfulness in Christian practice is something of a paradox: when I promise exclusive fidelity to one other human being, I promise that my faithfulness will not be dependent on having my wants gratified at any given moment. I make a commitment that reflects divine grace to the extent that it declares itself independent of future 'performance'.[287]

Thus it becomes free of fear of failure, or even of death. Maturity is not the cancellation of identity — of I-ness, but the "recognition and enactment of the self's reality *in* the other".[288] An apophatic theology of sex rests upon discovering ourselves in what is not possible.

4   Sex with things

The story of Pygmalion in Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*[289] tells of a man whose misogyny drives him to sculpt an idealised figure of a woman out of ivory, devoid of human flaws or individuality. The figure is perfect in every way except one — it is lifeless. He decorates the figure lavishly until she "appears most lovable". Then "he lays her on a bed luxurious, spread with coverlets of Tyrian purple dye, and naming her the consort of his couch, he lays her reclining head on the most soft and downy pillows, trusting she could feel". The last sentence is telling. In Pygmalion's imagination he longs for the figure (known in later retellings of the story as Galatea) to be not only beautiful to look at, but also sentient.

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[287] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 132.

[288] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 131.

[289] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 10, trans. by Mary Innes (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 213–214.

Later, after prayers to Venus the goddess of love, Pygmalion embraces his sculpture, to find that it is warm and yielding like flesh. "The ivory seemed to soften at the touch, and its firm texture yielded to his hand", and though unbelieving at first Pygmalion "again and yet again, gives trial to his hopes by touching with his hand". It is clear that the statue is alive when "the maiden felt the kisses given to her." In this particular metamorphosis, the 'other' becomes human, not because it is the object of Pygmalion's touch, but only when it responds to that touch. At this point Ovid's story ends. We do not learn whether the statue-bride becomes enfleshed to the point of autonomy, but we are left to suspect that the misogynist Pygmalion's desire for a perfect partner might not survive the realities of human intercourse. Has Pygmalion made a person, or has he simply created an extension of himself in which his own self-loathing must eventually be manifest? Is the use of a teledildonic device an example of pygmalionism?

Pygmalionism describes the paraphilia of sexual desire for an object such as a doll that one wishes were human. In contrast, agalmatophilia describes the sexual desire for a doll or mannequin in the knowledge that it is not human. Sometimes this takes the form of 'objectum sexuality', when individuals form intimate relationships with inanimate objects, which may be as diverse as a briefcase, an Austin Metro car or the Eiffel Tower.[290] Whilst it may be unusual to seek to solemnize an intimate relationship with a vehicle or a landmark, it is perhaps no more than the extreme end of the spectrum of far more common co-dependant relationships humans create with digital technology, from mobile phones to assistive technologies, to the internet itself. When a person carries a mobile phone in an intimate place like a breast or trouser pocket, gazes at it and strokes or swipes it into life, does the object become, more than simply a medium of communication, an object of fetishism?

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[290] Amy Marsh, 'Love Among the Objectum Sexuals'*, Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 13 (2010) <http://www.ejhs.org/volume13/ObjSexuals.htm> [Accessed 22 June 2022].

In this section I will examine how Rowan Williams' apophatic theology of human relationships, and particularly of sex, might inform thinking about an encounter between a human person and a digital construct such as a computer or a robot. I will consider how Williams' emphasis on the discovery of identity in relationship depends on the particularity and authentic participation of two material and independent persons, and the presence of a third receptor of desire, for genuine encounter to occur — the trinity of the one and other who make love, and the love that is made. Where Williams relies on the analogy of 'the loving gaze', I will explore how touch might be construed as a primary mark of personhood-in-relation, so that the inability of a machine to touch, or to know that it is being touched, disqualifies it from full intercourse with a human.

The ground of human sexuality is the desire of persons who are different and separate to know one another, but also to be known. This is contingent on the particularity of persons. Without the absolute difference between autonomous persons, there can be no catholic community, only undifferentiated unity. In seeking a sexual ethic, Williams explores the edge spaces of human contact, where identity is created and preserved in the process of struggle to sustain difference and unity. The validation of personhood occurs in the touching places — both analogically and literally — between individuals.

For that process of actualisation to happen, persons need to bring to the quest what is most authentically human: their presence, shackled as it is to the realities of death, vulnerability and sexual desire. If humans bring to the process of community-making that which is less than wholly authentic, it cannot make progress. For this reason, Williams sees fantasy as the enemy of reality. His gospel is posited on the disarming power of actuality, which he set out in a very early sermon from his time at Mirfield College: "The gospel frees us from fear and fantasy […] it is the great enemy of self-indulgent fantasy."[291] This is particularly true in sex, where embracing failure and rejecting fantasy are necessary steps to authenticity. Myers comments that

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[291] Rowan Williams, 'To Give and Not to Count the Cost', *Sobornost,* 7.5 (Summer 1977), 401–3.

authentic social exchange occurs wherever different persons mediate meaning to one another […] For Williams, truth is that new thing that emerges into being when different selves engage in the hard work of sustaining their differences.[292]

In *Lost Icons,* Rowan Williams challenges the "dominant myths of the authentic, hidden self".[293] By way of example he makes connections with body art, celebrity memoirs, the fascination in teaching chimps and dolphins to speak, and the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.[294] Had it been current when he was writing I have no doubt he would have had plenty to say about the role of social media in the construction and projection of the self. In the world of Tik-Tok and Instagram, the line between authenticity and fakery is hotly contested. On the one hand, being your authentic 'no filter' self is sometimes regarded in digital culture as a virtue. On the other hand, various forms of inauthentic presence such as sock-puppetry and image filtering are also sometimes regarded as legitimate forms of self-expression.

The background to this, Williams says, is that North Atlantic culture has lost a sense of temporal context. We construct our selves in the context of our personal story — but to do so requires a sense of history, not just of the eternal present. Williams has time for Freudian psychoanalysis, because he sees it as a mechanism for the stripping away of protective fantasies, and the avoidance of historical and temporal materiality — the same role that can be performed in religion by apophatic theology. In fact, Myers says that "I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that a dread of self-deceptive fantasy is, in fact, the secret engine of Williams' work."[295] Far from seeing faith as an answer to human questions, he eschews any false attempt to impose meaning. He echoes Iris

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[292] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 54.
[293] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 207.

[294] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 205 - 207.

[295] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 107.

Murdoch in saying that "Almost anything that consoles us is a fake."[296] In an early sermon on T. S. Eliot, he argues that we only experience love when we refuse consoling religious fantasy and accept that ours is a world of meaninglessness, violence, death, loss.[297]

This brings us to the heart of the difficulty of sexual engagement between a person and a non-person such as a machine, or for that matter an animal or a child (who is a person not yet fully self-actualised). Humans, as bodies, belong to a material world to which we are not superior. In sexual encounter we are dependent on there being a person who is other than us, and yet desires us, and indeed desires us to desire them. Williams defines sexual perversion as "refusing the otherness of the material world".[298] We bring to the sexual encounter "the passionate desire to *be seen*, to have one's truth not only expressed but somehow acknowledged or validated".[299] But in online or mechanical sexual encounter, the non-human other is synthesised or abstracted. The machine may emulate a loving gaze, but it cannot by definition desire an individual, because desire requires two persons, and a third object of desire. Digital sexual encounter may simulate seeing, or indeed touching, but this is always dependent on there being real world sexual encounter, since the digital can never be more than a metaphor or artistic/cultural representation of true personhood. If the online experience becomes dominant, the metaphor becomes redundant. What is worse, perhaps, the person who comes to the encounter loses something of their own personhood because it is not reflected to them by the machine.

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[296] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Oxford: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 59.

[297] Rowan Williams, 'Lazarus: In Memory of T.S. Eliot', in Williams, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1994).

[298] Rowan Williams, 'What Does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity', *New Blackfriars,* 82 no. 964 (2001), 272.

[299] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 205.

Jean Baudrillard notes that "sex is not a function, it is what makes a body a body".[300] Perhaps we are deceiving ourselves if we use the word touch at all, when all we are describing is the mechanics of a machine butting up against human skin. In machine sex we become depersonalised, falling prey to what Williams calls "the seduction of the timeless, the abstract self. An abstract self is one that has no life in the lives, speech and perceptions of concrete others."[301]

Of course, it is possible to have something that *looks* and even *feels* like sex with an artefact, but if sex with a machine becomes fulfilling, we should take that as a sign of its inadequacy. Any form of transhumanism, or any attempt to supersede the limitations of the body by the addition of technology, has its roots in the desire to not be physical any more. The desire for humans to know themselves other than through the medium of their bodies is hardly new. The seduction of the abstract has been a theme from Plato, through Augustine, to classical culture, and engagement with synthetic personae through digital technology is no more than an updated version of an ancient longing. But if it is indulged, it is an avoidance of the difficulty and discipline of being human.

> The risk of failing to inhabit our world, and thus to inhabit our bodies. As I've suggested, the risk involved here is not simply the risk of a worrying philosophical mistake, but something like the risk of losing what it might mean to be human at all.[302]

The drive to mechanise sexual encounter has something to do with the wish to avoid risk, whether that be the precarity of exclusive partnership, the risk of disease, unwanted pregnancy or simply the unavailability of a partner. It is about being in control. The self that we know is always in question, and is revealed in the frustrating

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[300] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 98.

[301] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 167.

[302] Williams, *Being Human*, 57.

gap between desire and reality. The "tragic shadow" cast over human sexuality is that "the distance between myself and another is never overcome, but only reasserted and sustained".[303] Conversely, a non-personal sexual partner such as a toy or a machine that is risk free, 'always on', and always available, takes away the opportunity to know myself.[304] It is in the negotiation of this that I am able to 'tell' myself. Grace is being drawn into a loss of control to the complete desire that God — or the sexual other — has for us. We are tempted to think that adulthood is about being responsible and aware, but in fact it is about realising that we are not in control, but confused, partly-conscious, acted-upon as much as acting.

Goodness, says Iris Murdoch, is "the almost impossible countering of a powerful egocentric mechanism".[305] To achieve this requires deep attention, a seeing of what is really there and a touching of what actually exists in space and time. In contrast, if you pay deep attention to a screen, or to a sex robot, you will discover that there is not a real person there, but an abstraction, a cultural artefact. To allow oneself to become subservient to an artefact is the definition of idolatry. We are to live in, from and with the rest of the material world, but not in subjection to it.

5   Look but don't touch

In a series of dimly-lit rooms adjoining London's Piccadilly Circus, a never-ending stream of tourists snakes between glass cabinets, peering at the contents. In each cabinet is a human body, or part of a body. The bodies have been stripped of their skin, treated with a plastic solution to prevent decay, recoloured, and arranged in lifelike poses: one riding a horse, another playing poker, another kicking a football. I say 'one riding a horse' and so on, but of course the person whose body it is (or was?)

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[303] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 55.

[304] I accept that in some circumstances, a person who uses a device such as a sex doll may indeed be only too aware of their own inadequacies.

[305] Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 46.

is not aware that they appear to be riding a horse. They have been posed like a mannequin for the exhibition. For all we know, the person whose body is displayed in the case might never have seen a horse, let alone ridden one. In life, they might have been allergic to horses, or terrified of them. In death, their passivity makes them inseparable. In the catalogue for the *Body Worlds* exhibition, its creator Gunther von Hagens assures the visitors that each body appears with the full knowledge and consent of its erstwhile owner, and that the exhibition (which is replicated in Berlin, Amsterdam, Heidelberg, San Jose and several touring collections) is a serious scientific and educational project. But the degree of consent a living individual can exercise over what might be done with their body after death must be questionable.[306]

Graham Ward sees *Body Worlds* as a symptom of post-modernity's fascination with embodiment.[307] Other examples might include Channel 4's *Naked Attraction*, a TV game in which individuals supposedly in search of a partner are presented with a choice of six naked strangers in brightly-lit boxes, revealed in stages by a rising screen, and invited to choose a date "based on naked attraction alone". The subject is invited to look but not touch.

In the Foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Franz Josef Wetz notes that "The visitor's behaviour inside the exhibition hall is notably quiet, solemn, and disciplined, rather unusual in today's societies."[308] There is something liminal and

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[306] In 2004 van Hagens agreed to return seven corpses to China after admitting that some of the bodies used in his exhibitions might have come from executed prisoners. Reported in Luke Harding, 'Von Hagens forced to return controversial corpses to China', *The Guardian,* 23 January 2004 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/23/arts.china> [Accessed 28 June 2022].

[307] Graham Ward, 'The Metaphysics of the Body'*, in Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present,* ed. by Elaine L. Graham (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 160 (FN 5). NB Ward misnames the exhibition as *Bodies.*

[308] Foreword in Gunther von Hagens, *Body Worlds* (Heidelberg: Arts and Sciences Exhibitions and Publishing, 2018), 5.

transgressive about the experience of viewing the plastinated corpses. We have to trust that the persons who have donated their bodies have consented to being gazed at by strangers — though they have no way to express or withdraw that consent. Multiple millions of strangers can exercise judgements or indifference over the figures at will, without the subjects having any rights in return.

Of course, the strange thing is the opportunity to look in detail at a human body — to stare even — without the body looking back. It is not only the passivity of the plastinated bodies that is disturbing, but their powerlessness, their inability to exercise any mutuality.

The organisers recognise the lack of mutuality, but construe it as an educational tool.

> In this exhibition, by looking at a foreign body one discovers one's own body in a whole new way. It is comparable to looking at oneself – without a mirror.[309]

This justification is questionable. According to the catalogue:

> *Body Worlds* needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the growing body consciousness of our time. Today, 'working on the body' more and more often replaces 'working with the body.' The less we need our bodies just to survive, the more we worry about them as the vessel and embodiment of life. As a result, we become more health conscious.[310]

But are humans in the West becoming more 'body conscious?' Or are we perhaps becoming *less* body conscious — less awestruck by the vulnerability of the flesh of another; more able to take our own bodies for granted, because we can do so much to circumvent or compensate for their limitations?

The shock of *Body Worlds* lies in the sheer power differential between the viewer and the disempersoned body in the display cabinet. Frozen outside of space and time, they don't even have the protection of their skin. I can see this person, but they cannot see

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[309] von Hagens, *Body Worlds,* 5.

[310] von Hagens, *Body Worlds,* 5.

me. I could touch them, if they were not behind glass, but they could not feel my touch. In fact, the plastinated bodies have been stripped of only one organ — the organ of touch. That being so, are they really a person at all? If I am naked with a stranger, I am conscious of myself. If that stranger walks behind me so that I cannot see them, I feel particularly vulnerable. But at *Body Worlds* there is no difference between front and back, sides, up or down, inside or outside, now and then. It is all one way — all for my gaze.

To discount an otherwise vital sense in the process of apprehension is quite typical of an age in which television offers the nonsense of cookery shows like *Masterchef* in which the audience never tastes or smells the food, and dating programmes such as *Naked Attraction* in which participants are seen fully naked, but never so much as hold hands before choosing a partner.

Merleau-Ponty prefigures the objectification enacted at *Body Worlds* when he says that

> the other's gaze does not transform me into an object, and my gaze does not transform him into an object, unless […] we both establish an inhuman gaze, and unless each senses his actions, not as taken up and understood, but rather as observed like the actions of an insect. This is what happens, for example, when I suffer the gaze of a stranger. But even then the objectification of each by the other's gaze is only harmful because it takes the place of a possible communication. A dog's gaze upon me hardly bothers me at all. The refusal to communicate is still a mode of communication.[311]

Without going quite as far as Williams, who says that the gaze of the other (and ultimately of God) constitutes my personhood, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless says that

> There is, between my consciousness and my body such as I live it, and between this phenomenal body and the other person's phenomenal

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[311] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 378.

body such as I see it from the outside, an internal relation that makes the other person appear as the completion of the system.[312]

The creators of *Body Worlds* fail to explain why tourists looking at the exhibits behave with "hushed awe", when minutes earlier they were observing thousands of living exhibits milling around Piccadilly Circus, often bumping into others or physically swerving to avoid them. *Body Worlds* is a liminal space, and walking through it feels a little like entering a cathedral or a sacred building. The plastinated bodies are relics of unknown saints, and we feel that they might have some sort of spiritual power. Perhaps what visitors interpret as awe is actually a feeling of transgression; the sense that we are not sure that we should really be there; the intimation that we may be in some way devaluing the persons displayed in the cases.

A visit to see the living animals at London Zoo, or even the stuffed animals at the Natural History Museum, doesn't seem to be playing such perilous games with something so sacred — the human personhood of an individual. These are people we could once have communicated with; perhaps known or loved. Once upon a time we might not only have seen them as they are, but been seen by them. We might have touched them and been touched by them. We might even have loved them and been loved by them. Perhaps what *Body Worlds* is selling us is not so much the opportunity to gaze at what we might or might not construe as a human person, but a lived experience of absence; an apophatic meditation on the nature of personhood. The people in the display cases are certainly there, and they are recognisably personal. But although we can see them, we can't touch them. They are people out of reach. We are aware that we are missing "the completion of the system." We are supremely conscious of all that we *cannot* do in relation to the people in the glass cabinets in front of us, because of what is denied to us: the unique context of "the one wild and

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[312] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 368.

precious life"[313] they lived; the mutuality of recognizing each other's humanity; the ability to touch and be touched.

Meanwhile, the liminal experience of *Body Worlds* is further emphasized by the blinking red lights on the security cameras in each corner of the room. We become aware that as we gaze at the unseeing bodies on display, we too are being watched.

In his essay on 'Touch and Situatedness', Matthew Ratcliffe notes that "It is curious that studies of intersubjectivity almost invariably emphasise visual perception of one person by another."[314] He argues that vision does not so obviously manifest the reversibility and relatedness that can be made explicit by reflecting on touch. The absence of reversibility in vision is a key difference between the two senses. Ratcliffe suggests that Merleau-Ponty is an exception in arguing that touch is foundational to intersubjectivity. Rowan Williams, however, repeatedly reaches for the image of being *held in the loving gaze of God* as the definitive constituent of personhood. This in itself is a strangely mixed metaphor: being *seen* by God is the active ingredient of the experience, but that gaze is dependent on, or effects, being in some sense *held*. It is also, as we have seen, a three-dimensional embrace, since the gaze and the holding are both instantiated in love.

I want to suggest that whilst the experience of the loving gaze of God is a fundamentally constitutive analogy for the realization of personhood, the analogy of being held or touched has become equally if not more significant in digital culture, and represents a helpful extension to Williams' emphasis on gaze. Graham Ward sums this

[313] From Mary Oliver, 'The Summer Day', in Oliver, *Devotions* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 316.

[314] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Touch and Situatedness', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies,* 16:3 (2008), 318.

up, when he says that "touch cannot reduce the body to an object seen, to a visible surface, in the way sight can".[315]

Mark Paterson writes that "We have an enduring cultural assumption, present in Plato and compounded in the Enlightenment, of the primacy of vision."[316] There is often a moral dimension to the elevation of sight over touch. For example, the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino was not untypical in associating touch with the more carnal forms of love, in contrast to the 'higher' or spiritual love associated with vision.[317] 'Doubting Thomas' is reprimanded because he didn't have sufficient confidence in what he could see with his own eyes, but needed also to touch with his hands. The implication is that touch is the baser sense.

Constance Classen argues that the turn from touch to sight is more recent. In the chapter on 'Tactile Arts' in her book *The Deepest Sense*, says argues there has been a decisive move from the centrality of touch in human perception to the almost exclusive emphasis on gaze in the modern era.[318] She gives a number of examples of the transition. For instance, in early museums and botanical gardens, it was quite normal to touch the exhibits. Touch was a way of verifying the experience and also of intimate exploration. Sometimes there was a numinous sense of transfer of power, for instance in touching a unicorn's horn, or an Egyptian mummy.[319] In the galleries of a modern museum, touch is usually taboo (though a visit to satisfy the other senses in the coffee shop is virtually compulsory). Only sight is valued, followed by cognitive and

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[315] Graham Ward, 'The Metaphysics of the Body', 161.

[316] Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1.

[317] Geraldine Johnson, 'Touch, Tactility and the Reception of Sculpture in Early Modern Italy', in *A Companion to Art Theory,* ed. by C. Wilde and P. Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 61–74.

[318] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 123-146.

[319] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 142.
Phipps

aesthetic reflection. You are restricted from touching the exhibits lest the invisible acid on your hands should damage them. Touch is regarded as contagious or damaging. There is a strong sense in *Body Worlds* that if we were allowed to touch the exhibits something magical would be lost.

Classen also points to the move from handling the relics of saints to viewing images of them as an instance of the turn from touch to sight in aspects of cultic practice from the Middle Ages onwards.[320] The Protestant Reformation denounced the physicality of relics as a route to God. In the 21st century, the touch of a priest or teacher is likely to be seen as a matter of concern and suspicion rather than blessing or care.

In contrast, Moltmann says, the instrumentalised eye is massively busy in contemporary life.[321] We are observed, but in a disembodied way. Machine eyes such as facial recognition cameras do not perceive us as whole people, but passively observe our activities and misdemeanours. Where the department store offered the ability to touch and handle goods prior to purchase, internet shopping takes away touch and offers only sight — and then only the sight of a representation of the product. But a product that I cannot eventually hold in my hands is no product at all. Ratcliffe argues: "Without vision or hearing, one would inhabit a very different experiential world, whereas one would not have a world at all without touch."[322]

On this Husserl differs from the later Merleau-Ponty. A version of Husserl might work for Williams (as a trinitarian relational theist — you, me and God — the exterioception is provided by God). Merleau-Ponty doesn't feel that he needs more than one person, either human or divine, to make sense of perception. For him, there is no duality of

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[320] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 149.

[321] Elizabeth Wendell-Moltmann, *I am my Body* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1995), 91.

[322] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Touch and the Sense of Reality', in *The Hand, an Organ of the Mind: What the Manual Tells the Mental,* ed. by Zdravko Radman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

exterioception and proprioception; receptivity and spontaneity. The body just *is* the self — so both sight and touch are extraneous. The first epistle of John speaks of the incarnate Christ as perceived in multiple senses:

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.[323]

The sense is that God came to a world that knew it was seen, but was longing to be touched as well. In Christ, God fulfilled that desire, and so actualised the prevenient humanity of humankind.

The closest that Williams comes to including the role of touch in his analogy of intimate human relationships and the love of and for God is in his reflection on the Romanzas of St John of the Cross. This comes from the second period of Williams' thought as identified by Myers, when he was influenced by Hegel in asking how we understand negative theology in the *relations* of divine life. St John of the Cross, in *The Living Flame of Love* II:I, sees the action of God on the Soul in trinitarian terms: the hand that touches (the Father), the touch itself (the Son) and the burn or wound caused by the touch (the Spirit).[324]

As we have seen, Rowan Williams understands human sex as the embodied expression of reciprocal desire, objectified in a time and a place — an action. Whilst images of the loving gaze of God express the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son, and the mysterious eschatological relationship of the human person and the Trinity, the sense of touch expresses more directly the incarnation of that relationship in the intimate encounters of a human. It is perhaps even more difficult to apprehend the mystery of being touched by God than it is to envisage being kept in God's loving gaze. But touch, even more than sight, expresses the sense of event.

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[323] 1 John 1:1.

[324] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 125.

> The action of God on the soul is a single event of encounter, irreducibly threefold in its constitution. When a hand touches an object, the actual organic thing that is the hand makes contact with another reality and in greater or lesser measure affects that other subject; so with the act of God.[325]

The touching hand, the touched body and the touch are all involved. Every touch is a wound, a burn; but every touch also burns with the excess of love that inevitably comes in the meeting of two realities. A touch that is loving is far more than the touch itself. Its significance is so great that it transcends the extent of either reality. Likewise, a touch that is hurtful or abusive far transcends the extent of the reality of either the toucher or the touched. It changes and expands the personhood of both. It wounds, and scars.

Every act of touch, whether erotic or abusive, has a trinitarian dimension. It depends on the meeting of two people, plus a third object of desire. For Williams, this third dimension is the encarnation of the love of God; a revelation of the Spirit in the world. For Merleau-Ponty it is a chiasm, an intertwining that is perhaps less ethereal, but no less profound and mysterious. This, I suggest, is a core reason why sex between a person and a robot, in the sense of an equal and unmediated exchange of physical gift, is impossible. For sex, you need two people, plus a third object of desire, which is the overflow of the love. That overflow might be obviously generative; it might take the form of the conception of a child, or the healing or strengthening of a relationship for the service of the community. It may be less obviously generative; a simple act of worship and wonder. Consensual sex at its best says 'I love you. You love me. And we love…' Even non-consensual or abusive sex is relational — an expression of desire, resistance or hatred. Even abusive touch is trinitarian: 'I exploit you; you are exploited by me; the power with which you are exploited belongs to me alone.' But none of this reciprocity is possible in solo or machine sex. Mechanised expressions of sex (i.e., sex between a person and a robot or machine) may be able to emulate the mechanical behaviours and expressions of mutuality, but without the reciprocation of desire,

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[325] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 126.

sexual expression remains two-dimensional. There is no mystery in sex with a computer. It is entirely rational and replicable, and by virtue of its rationality and replicability it ceases to be truly sex. Instead it is a product — a cultural artefact. Sex with a machine cannot fulfil Williams' fundamental criterion.

> For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable.[326]

Williams is defining what forms of sexual expression should be regarded as fully human, and therefore fully reflective of the economy of the Trinity. Non-consensual touch, such as rape, paedophilia and bestiality cannot necessarily be said to be devoid of mutuality, since in each case there is encounter between one and another. What is missing is the third element; the love that overflows from the encounter, the deflection of desire. For this reason, sex within a contracted heterosexual marriage might be equally problematic, if there is injustice in the relationship. It is also why it is impossible to have sex with a machine. A some*one* and a some*thing* can interact, but they cannot share joy.

It is this third-party experience that is sometimes described by the profound phrase 'being in love' (or more accurately perhaps 'beings-in-love'). Being in love is an intensification of the sense of *me*, and of what is *not* me, and also that there is *more* than us. There is an intrinsic vulnerability, which is evidenced in the risky business of being naked together. As a signifier of relationship, it is a far more risky and profound business than taking out a joint mortgage or getting a cat. It is

> The moment of acknowledged conviction, shared by two people, that each is accepted, given time and room, treated not as an object of desire alone but as a focus for attention and clarification.[327]

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[326] Williams, 'The Body's Grace', 313.
[327] Williams, *Lost Icons,* 190.

Williams acknowledges that

> There is plenty that is paradoxical about all this – and it is formidably easy to sentimentalise. But the truth is clearly that in the relations we designate as 'being in love', the urge for sexual gratification is blended with a range of other affects and concerns that enable the subject to speak and see himself or herself afresh.[328]

In a fascinating 2013 lecture on the theology of health and healing, Williams considers what it might mean to for a person to exist in an "uninhabited" body of flesh.

> Flesh is human life somehow alienated, cut off from its environment, cut off from that life of spirit which in St Paul's usage is always about relation. And if salvation is, in its widest sense, seen as the bringing together of flesh and spirit in body, then perhaps we can see how all this has some pertinence to what we mean by health.[329]

The Son "must love the excess of the Father's love, that which escapes being a mirror of his own identity".[330] But sex with a robot cannot escape in this way. Even if a robot could wholly emulate the *appearance* of love for another, it could not by definition replicate an excess of love, and therefore could not call out in the object its own excess of love. It cannot but mirror the identity of the 'user'. In fact, the very term 'user' defines the limits of the experience of love.

The eucharist is the sign of the church's "refusal to treat the world as 'dead matter'".[331] Nature "is decisively included in culture, material things become communicative signs without losing their ordinary physicality and distinctiveness".[332]

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[328] Williams, *Lost Icons,* 191.

[329] Williams, 'The Theology of Health and Healing', n.p.

[330] Williams, 'Deflections of Desire', 121–122.

[331] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 16.

[332] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 16.

In the eucharist, then, the church recognises that what is bare matter becomes incarnate. Williams says that

> We are most distinctively human when we refuse to think of ourselves in isolation from matter and animality; and thinking of ourselves in solidarity with matter and animality involves, among other things, the thinking of the world around us as shot through with the same life of logos that we live from.[333]

The flip side of this is that if a person becomes subservient to a machine, that person is ceding life to something that is less alive, less personal than themselves. A smart phone may have the ability to connect to the internet, and thereby access almost infinite amounts of information. The smart phone may act as a calculator, a video camera, a sound recorder, a mobile library and so much more. What it cannot do is think, calculate, initiate or control the world like, say, a human hand. The implication of this is that plain human touch is greater than the sum of its parts. What that might mean is the subject of the next chapter.

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[333] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 16.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOUCHING THE SACRED

> Bodies are epiphanies of meaning which, while locating us firmly in space and time, take us beyond mere flesh and blood to confront and reveal deeper threads.[334]
>
> Elaine Graham, *Words Made Flesh*

The quasi-sacramental character of touch

Twenty meters above the floor of the Sistine Chapel in The Vatican, Michelangelo's vast fresco depicts a theological account of Biblical history from the Creation to the Final Judgement. Its centrepiece is 'The Creation of Adam'. A man is naked, reclining, and reaching out somewhat listlessly toward God. God, clothed, and curiously already surrounded by apparently human figures, reaches down purposefully toward the passive man. Whilst Adam is looking up into God's eyes, God's look is focussed on the point where their two fingers touch — or rather where they don't touch. The reaching seems entirely mutual, but at the same time, paradoxically, it seems as if God, not Adam, has the initiative. Between the fleshy hand of God and the limp finger of Adam there is a gap like a synaptic cleft. This visual apophasis, just nineteen millimetres wide, is one of the most intriguing negative spaces in the history of art.

The painting quite obviously represents God bringing life to Adam through both of their fingertips. In this image, inspired by the book of Genesis, God is not moulding the form of Adam out of existing matter. Adam's body is already perfectly formed. Nor is God breathing life into Adam's body, which might have been a perfectly understandable interpretation of the Genesis stories. This is not the creation of Adam as recorded in Genesis, but a theological construct, the vivification of Adam. The focus

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[334] Elaine Graham, *Words Made Flesh: Writings in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 84.

of the image is clear; it is the touch of God that enlivens Adam's flesh and makes him human. So, Paul Barolsky notes that

> We speak of the scene represented by Michelangelo as the Creation of Adam, but in fact we should say more precisely that the fresco portrays the *Creator Spiritus*, who, having formed the body of man from the earth, as the Bible says, has not yet breathed the spirit or breath of life into him. For Adam will not be inspirited until his body is touched by spirit, the divine digit of the Creator, *digitus paternae dextrae.*[335]

And yet they are not touching. So why did Michelangelo paint his God, and his conception of Adam, proximate but not contiguous, with this mysterious nineteen millimetre space between them?

The figures of Adam and God look vibrant and three-dimensional, and the space between the fingers itself creates a narrative. Something momentous is happening, or is about to happen, or has just happened; something profoundly sacramental. We can't be certain how the story unfolds. Is God in the process of withdrawing his hand just after imparting life into Adam's body? Adam certainly looks alive — though he has the expression of someone slightly reluctantly waking from sleep. He looks passive; not as if he is feeling his way toward God, but as if he is waiting for God to act. So is God moving toward Adam to touch him — the image being captured as it were just before Adam comes alive? Or has the fresco caught God in the act of passing the life force to Adam across the gap, so that they never actually touch? Is physical contact between them an unnecessary, or even sacrilegious, stage in Adam's taking on human life? Perhaps Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' is also telling us something about the relationship between the Creator God and the Second Adam, the incarnate Christ. What we are seeing is a moment of sacramental self-gift — the self-gift of God to Adam, and the much weaker, more passive but none the less intentional self-gift of Adam to God.

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[335] Paul Barolsky, 'Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" and the Aesthetics of Theology', *Notes in the History of Art,* 20.4 (2001), 9–11.

The consensus of art historians is that Michelangelo depicts the passing or flowing of some vivifying force from God into Adam — perhaps fire or electricity — which in turn represents life or soul. "The vital spark flows from the outstretched hand of God into the matter He has shaped, and in response this matter begins to live",[336] says Freedberg. "The vital energy is most frequently supposed a spark of fire or energy",[337] says Hartt. But in fact there is no evidence of fire in the fresco, and the suggestion that electricity is flowing is anachronistic. Nor is the concept of the infusion of a soul in any way faithful to the Genesis narrative.

Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle suggests that "God is not infusing any element into Adam; not celestial fire or air, or terrestrial water or earth. No creation of a soul is depicted, although that belief was culturally implicit."[338] Instead, in Michelangelo's depiction, it is the touch itself, which has either just happened or is just about to happen, that is vivifying. The gap constructs the touch as an event of cosmic significance eternally transpiring in space and time. We cannot even say that there is a clear direction of flow from God to Adam, because there is no possibility of subject and object, of toucher and touchee. The apophatic space poses the question, is it truly possible for a person to touch and be touched by God in a particular place at a particular time? If it is, what momentous thing will occur?

It is not surprising that the image of God and Adam meeting fingertip to fingertip is mysterious. We have already established that touch cannot be characterised by a singular set of criteria, but only by convention. At its most basic, it is a universal human experience, but it consists of a complex bundle of physiological experiences and cultural meanings. Within the Western Christian tradition, touch is freighted with temporal and eschatological significance, and its theological meanings have been

[336] Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and in Florence,* vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1961), 104.

[337] Frederick Hartt, *Michelangelo*, vol. 3 (New York, Harry N. Adams, n.d.), 102.

[338] Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 15.

transformed in the post-resurrection era. Consequently, developing a Christian theology of touch is a little like trying to bridge the gap between the fingers of God and Adam. For that reason, and with those nineteen millimetres of blue-grey plaster as an icon, only an apophatic approach will allow us to feel our way towards it.

Naturally, we find a number of these themes echoed and illuminated in the Bible, so in the chapter that follows this one I will look at some of the ways in which touch is regarded as meaningful in Scripture. I will suggest an interpretation of the developing Biblical narrative in which touch is seen as constituting the new eschatological community, the present and future body of Christ, in a way parallel to the constitution of the community of early Israel effected by the Levitical laws.

First, though, I want to consider some of the ways in which touch might be considered to have sacramental qualities.

1   Sacrament and touch

At the beginning of this thesis I wrote about the experience of a person's finger brushing against the exposed skin of another person. Using insights from phenomenology and theology I have set out to explore what it is that has occurred in this or any other instance of touch. It is clear that when a person touches an other, be it another person or a non-sentient object, something of significance occurs that goes beyond the brute facts of molecules and moments. Touch is an event at which meaning is created and recognised. Rowan Williams' explanation of this lies in the distinctiveness and irreducibility of the human body, which

> is never helpfully described as an object like other material objects, since by that curious material transaction called language, we continue to recognize that the oddity of this material reality that is my body is an oddity shared by other materially recognizable bodies.[339]

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[339] Rowan Williams, 'On Being a Human Body', *Sewanee Theological Review*, 42.4 (1998), 406.

This oddity of physical embodiment and interpersonal community is the unavoidable blessing and curse of being creatures in a shared existence. Commenting on Lossky, Williams says that "the personal in us is not an item among others: it is the strangeness and difficulty, the irreducibility, within any relation".[340] Touch belongs at the heart of Christian thought because the body-in-communion has the potential to be sacramental — a place where God meets the earth, where grace may be realised, and where people may become holy together.

> Personal life is 'ecstatic' in the sense that it exceeds the mere activation of a set of generic possibilities – doing the sort of thing that this sort of agent does; it is the kind of activity that creates new possibilities of communication because it sets in motion a *history*, a reflective telling of the world's process that is not just a description of *kinds* of action and *kinds* of agent. Personal being is, we have suggested, 'linguistic' being in an extended sense.[341]

This 'linguistic' nature is not reducible to an aspect of what it is to be human. It is written into the nature of every person. Williams' Christological anthropology acknowledges the fundamental dependence of persons on each other and on God, and the innate priestliness of human existence, as against the functionality of machine existence.

> We should understand the body, in space and time, as that which interacts with the world in a myriad of interconnections, relationships that are not easily reducible to function because it seems to work with 'information' of a less determinate character, less capable of being rendered in items of information.[342]

That is more than to say that the world is full of sacredness; more even than to say that the human body is a particular locus of revelation in time and space. It is to say

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[340] Todd Breyfogle, 'Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams', *Cross Currents*, 45.3 (1995), 307–308.

[341] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 12.

[342] Williams, 'On Being a Human Body', 405.

something far more outrageous: that there is a sacramentality about every particular instance of human touch that requires the initiative of God. When human skin touches an object other than itself, there is inevitably some kind of revelatory encounter that goes beyond the merely physical, and is not entirely reducible to chemical or digital signals. It is different in kind, for example, to what happens when a pebble falls onto a stone floor.

When two humans touch each other, whether the touch is generative or loving, violent or even accidental, something far more significant and mystical happens. I suggest that touch can helpfully be understood in terms of sacrament. I am using 'sacrament' here as a strong metaphor rather than a specifically religious construct.

Broadly speaking, a sacrament is an action that is recognized as both heralding and actualising a place and time of meeting between a human person and an other, that has the potential to become a locus of grace, a point of revelation and of *caritas*. Sacraments are about the intersection of the human and the divine, with epiphanic consequences. As Peter Bouteneff says,

> Anything that pertains to union with the other and with the sacred could in some sense be called sacramental. One's experience of music, art, food, sex, can be transcendent, epiphanic, and in this sense be termed sacramental in a qualitative way.[343]

Notably, he has identified examples of taste, touch, sight and hearing as potential places of grace. Of course, it is touch that primarily concerns us here.

Classically, in the recognition of a sacrament, the physical contact between a person and a natural object such as bread, wine or water is imbued with meaning, so that it becomes an occasion where the person in community meets God. There is an event-ness about this, as it is inevitably located in space and time. It cannot be merely

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[343] Peter C. Bouteneff, 'Sacraments as the Mystery of Union: Elements in an Orthodox Sacramental Theology', in *The Gestures of God,* ed. by Geoffrey Rowell and Christine Hall (London: Continuum, 2004), 105.

representative. It is an act in the moment. Just as a kiss does not represent love, but actually embodies it, so a sacrament embodies its meaning rather than merely illustrating it.

Like other recognisable sacraments, a sacramental conception of touch is oriented on the incarnation of Christ, located first in time and space in first century Palestine, and now also beyond the very concepts of time and space. For those who choose to believe, Jesus himself is the sacrament, and the incarnation is an event in which God impactfully touches God's earth.

> By the incarnation, God binds us to the temporal world as always and inescapably our starting point and dispossesses us of the illusion that there is a point within the temporal world where we can settle. Every point in the temporal order becomes a point of departure.[344]

There is of course a great deal of theological divergence on the meaning of sacraments, most fundamentally over whether sacraments are an initiative of God or of humans, and whether they are delimited in number and scope by the doctrines of the church, or are freely available by virtue of humanity.[345] I don't propose to engage with those questions in any depth here. Rather, I will follow Thomas Aquinas, who suggests that the most important thing about sacraments is their purpose, which is to make people holy.[346]

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[344] Rowan Williams, 'Augustine's Christology: Its Spirituality and Rhetoric', in *In the Shadow of the Incarnation: Essays on Jesus Christ in the Early Church in Honour of Brian E. Daley, S.J.*, ed. by Peter W. Martens (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 177.

[345] This is broadly speaking what lay behind the Donatist controversy in Roman North Africa in the early part of the fourth century AD. The core dispute was over whether the sacraments of the church could be invalidated by the sinfulness or betrayal of the priest, or whether their efficacy was primarily dependent on the completed work of Jesus Christ. The controversy was still live at the time of Augustine, who leaned toward the latter view.

[346] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume 17, part 3, article 2, objection 3, 4.

The sacramentality of touch is located in its signification, not merely in physical contiguity. In illustrating this, Williams draws on Augustine's foundational hermeneutics expressed in *De Doctrina Christiana.*[347] Augustine distinguishes between *res* (a thing or reality or event) and *signum* (a sign or representation). A *res* is irreducibly what it is. It is separate from any *signum* (though sometimes a *res* might also be a *signum*, as in the case of a word, or a literal signpost). A sign, as Augustine defines it is "something that shows itself to the senses and something other than itself to the mind".[348] "Given signs are those which living things give to each other, in order to show, to the best of their ability, the emotions of their minds, or anything else they have felt or learnt."[349] The borderline between things and signs is defined functionally rather than ontologically: signs are not signs in essence. They are things employed to signify something.[350]

Human touch, which is an activity of the body, thereby belongs in the category of human language as a *signum* that cannot exist without a corresponding *res*. A correlate would be a human word, such as 'dog'. Whilst the sound of that simple syllable might be produced mechanically as a *signum* without being attached to the *res* of a four-legged creature, for example, by replicating it with a voice synthesiser, the word 'dog' itself can never be detached from what it signifies. And whilst the creature can exist as a *res* in itself, the word can only exist in a cultural context, in which it is both *res* and *signum*. This is because, as Williams says, "signifying is a threefold affair".[351] Significance is constituted by the signifier, the sign, and the context of

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[347] *De Doctrinia Christiana* is often rendered in English as 'On Christian Doctrine', or 'On Christian Teaching'. I will be referring to the Oxford World's Classics edition (1997) edited and translated by R. P. Green.

[348] Augustine, *De dialectica*, ed. by Jan Pinborg, trans. by B. Darrel Jackson (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975), 86.

[349] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 30.

[350] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching,* 30.

[351] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 43.

meaning in the one to whom it is signified. We have already seen this threefold significance worked out in Williams' understanding of human relationships comprising the lover, the one who is loved, and the love or desire itself.

In a discussion of sacramentality, Jean-Yves Lacoste points out that being objective does not in itself imply presence unless it engages the realm of emotional experience. The 'real presence' of a person to an other waits on this call and response.

> The object objectivates itself (the stone), or (the pen) it waits until its time comes, the time of its usefulness and of its use. A work of art, on the other hand, and the other man who confronts me, demand to be recognized: they appear to us whilst calling for a response. [sic] [352]

In the context of touch, we might imagine that the purely electro-mechanical action of touch could exist as a *res* — a thing with potential but not actual significance. That would be the case in the instance of a machine-synthesised touch, or a line of code that carries the information that is decoded in order to deliver a mechanical action, for example a digital phone signal which is encoded from sound waves, mediated as an electrical signal in the form of a succession of presences and absences, then decoded back into sound waves. During the mediation it has only *potential*, not *actual* meaning, at least in relation to the two parties on the phone. But that could not be the case if the touch involves direct contact between a human body or bodies. In the case of a human touch there could be no *res* without a corresponding *signum*. Human touch cannot be without meaning, even if sometimes the meaning is very attenuated (such as an accidental brush in a crowded space). If a human touches another human, even inadvertently, there are always two parties, a touch*er*, and a touch*ee*, who may be indistinguishable but are and remain separate; and there is also the touch itself with its complex of associated meanings.

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[352] Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Presence and Parousia', in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology,* ed. by Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 396.

Augustine overlays his understanding of *res* and *signum* with a distinction between two possible modes of meaning, which he calls *frui* (enjoyment) and *uti* (use). These are the broad categories of meaning or desire that exist between the parties in an exchange of language, and they are the foundation for his ethical understanding. Augustine states that *frui* (enjoyment) is the mode of engaging with an other out of love, for its own sake, whereas *uti* (use) is the mode of engaging with it instrumentally, for the fulfilment of another purpose.[353] "We can approach any particular *res* in two distinct ways: either we treat it as an end in itself, or as a sign towards something else."[354]

The theological context of this is essential. God is the foundational *res*, and, in relation to God, all else is potentially *signum*; God alone is to be enjoyed in and for Godself, and in respect of God all else is functional. Humans are creatures, and it is

> by God's own act and initiative [that] there is speech available for talking of him: the mind of God is embodied in Christ as our thoughts are in our words, and by this means God can be truly enjoyed by us, perceived, contemplated and loved in his self-sufficient being.[355]

"Not everything is *signum* in the ordinary course of things; but in the light of Christ, no *res* is left alone. It can be used, and so become a sign; it can mean what it is not."[356]

The entire human purpose is the enjoyment of God who is the ultimate and irreducible *res* who in no way depends on us or is defined in terms of us. Everything else in creation, including every human person, is *signum*. "For Augustine, since God is supremely *res*, the context in which all things are to be meaningfully placed, created

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[353] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.7, 9.

[354] Khegan Marcel Delport, 'Interior intimo meo: Rowan Williams on the Self', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal,* 4.2 (2018), 479.

[355] Williams, *On Augustine*, 44.

[356] Williams, *On Augustine*, 46.

reality exists as a *signum* of the divine reality, specifically as it is moved by *dilectio* towards God."[357] All humans are ultimately defined in relation to the creator, and in faith we are mandated to recognise each other, and the whole of creation, as objects of love and not of self-interest. Likewise, we are to receive from each other and from all of creation the love that is expressed within it. There is no other mode in which persons can exist in creation. That is why St Paul could write to the Christians in Rome that

> what may be known about God is plain, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.[358]

"The self […] can only be known as a self-in-relation, as a dynamic movement between interior reflex and exterior surface, that finds its ontological archetype in the triunity of God."[359] Whatever we touch, be it human, animal or machine, exists in space and time and is already an object of love. Touching it is a form of speaking its name, and in doing so we realise and release its significance.

As St Paul warned the Romans, there is nothing mechanical or inevitable about this outcome. Rowan Williams speaks of sacraments as actions, given to us to create possibilities of grace, but realised only as we choose to regard them as such. "We make signs, and make ourselves through signs."[360] It is the personal recognition of the uniqueness of the dying and rising of Christ that makes a sacrament effective, and not the mere performance of it. If we are to understand touch as potentially sacramental, then this will be of crucial importance, because it means that whether we understand any particular instance of human touch as sacred or not will be a matter of judgement.

[357] Delport, 'Interior intimo meo', 479.

[358] Romans 1:19–20.

[359] Delport, 'Interior intimo meo', 495.

[360] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 199.

Every plain touch has a meaning and significance. We have to come to a view on what that significance is. "The body we inhabit is the place where we make ourselves available to and addressable by others, capable of language and communication."[361] But "bodies only speak if and when they are made heavy with meaning".[362] The sacramental value or signification of touch will be the value that the touch*er* and the touch*ee* place upon it.

Catholic feminist theologian Susan A. Ross provides an example of how this broad understanding of sacramentality might work in practice. Like Williams, she prefers Augustine's understanding of sacraments as symbolic mediation to Aquinas' instrumental and causal understanding. In this way, she says, it is possible to be aware of the *real presence* "not just in the Eucharist but in the ordinariness of preparing meals, to convey a healing touch to a sick child, to do the daily work of reconciling children, spouses and friends",[363] all activities in which physical touch might take on a wider and deeper meaning.

It cannot be a coincidence that Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had a Catholic upbringing, reached for the word 'chiasm'[364] to describe the experience of simultaneously touching and being touched. When, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he described the ambiguity of one hand touching another, he might well have been drawing on incarnational theology, the mysterious idea of an extra-tangible God

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[361] Delport, 'Interior intimo meo', 484.

[362] Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (Durham, NJ: Duke University Press, 2002), 10.

[363] Susan A. Ross, 'God's embodiment and women', in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in a Feminist Perspective,* ed. by C. M. Lacugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 199.

[364] 'Chiasm' literally means 'crossing over.' Its root is in the Greek letter 'chi', which has the shape of an X. Chi is also the first half of the symbol Chi-Rho, which was adopted in early antiquity as a Christogram — a symbol to represent the incarnate Christ.

touching a tangible world and *vice versa*; the paradox of the particular *res* touching the infinite *res*. In that enigmatic construction, subject and object are inextricably blended, as that which touches is simultaneously that which is touched.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty gave priority to the subjective personal body over the objective; that which touches was the prime mover, even if only by the smallest margin, and that which was touched was the responder. This initiative of language by the toucher (God) is what Michelangelo represents in 'The Creation of Adam'. But by the time of his tantalisingly unfinished final essay 'The Intertwining—The Chiasm' Merleau-Ponty had come to regard the two as entirely parallel aspects of a single phenomenon.

> Through this criss-crossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange.[365]

Each hand is both touching and being touched, ambiguously and simultaneously both subject and object, continually exchanging their positions as subject-touching and object-touched. However, these separate maps never quite coincide. Reversibility is indeed always tantalizingly imminent but never actually happens; it slips away into the apophatic gap before being fully realised.

This means that for the later Merleau-Ponty, the sensible for-itself, touching, seeing body is not a transcendental ego separated from the world, but reflexively and hopefully implicated in the world it touches and sees, and in which it takes part.

> The body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, as tangible it descends among them, as touching it demonstrates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass.[366]

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[365] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133.

[366] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 146.

Merleau-Ponty did not use the word sacrament, but instead spoke of 'dehiscence', the gaping open or bursting forth like in a seedpod, as a figure that expresses something of the dynamic opening-out into the world of which it is a part. He spoke of the meeting of one and other as creating a precarity — which is perhaps as good a secular definition of a sacrament as any.

Rowan Williams is more inclined to speak of sacrament in terms of gift and desire. In the giving of a gift there is an imperceptible moment when ownership passes from the donor to the recipient. That is a moment of grace and possibility. In describing the function of a sacrament, Rowan Williams writes that "Over and above what we need for survival, we work on our world in what seems an insatiable desire for new perception and new possibilities of action".[367] This is our longing for what he calls 'the body's grace'. When a person touches the world, something of significance may happen. When a person touches another person, significance is unavoidable.

Judith Butler says that when we touch or are touched, "our very capacity to feel and our emergence as knowing and acting beings is at stake in the exchange".[368] All touch is at some level generative, but the nature of the touch matters.

> It is not on the basis of our being touched that we come to know the world. It is on the basis of our being touched in such a way that touched and touching form a chiasmic and irreducible relation. It is on the basis of this irreducible and nonconceptualizable figure, we might say, that we apprehend the world.[369]

When I touch an object, I know that I can feel. When I touch a person, I know that I am personal. But when I touch or am touched by a force that I cannot identify clearly as either a person or an object, I am presented with a dilemma, not only about what is

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[367] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 199.

[368] Judith Butler, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche', 204.

[369] Judith Butler, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche', 198.

touching me, but about who or what I am discovering about myself. Just as touching and being touched are coextensive and fundamentally 'intertwined' (to use Merleau-Ponty's expression), so I am formed by the experience of being loved and loving. For me to love is only possible because I first experience that I am loved. Touching and being touched, loving and being loved are not reciprocal. They are not one thing, such that they can be collapsed into one another. But nor can they be separated or experienced distinctly. There is touching, and there is being touched, and there is the extraordinary generative event that occurs at the moment and the place of touching, in which the one who is touched becomes alive. As modest and everyday as it might be, when one hand touches another, there is animation; a sacramental moment of meeting. Butler says:

> This interior sense of myself – obscure, passive, feeling – is the way that God is, as it were, manifest in the human soul. It is by virtue of this connection, which I cannot fully know, between sentience and God, that I understand myself to be a free being, one whose actions are not fully determined in advance.[370]

Butler's emphasis on the obscurity and incomprehensibility of the encounter is significant. What cannot be avoided in a touch encounter is potential, but at the same time what cannot be created in a touch encounter is certainty — and strangely, perhaps, it is in the uncertainty of meaning that human individuality is discovered and enabled to flourish. Rowan Williams believes that it is in the precarity of temporal encounter, over-shadowed by the certainty of death, that persons make meaning and discover their humanity.

By contrast, being knowingly touched by a non-sentient machine that is functionally immortal may release nothing in the subject. The meaning of touch that is generated by a machine or digitally synthesized can only ever be *uti* and never *frui*. A machine, be it ever so powerful, is intrinsically functional in a way that a human is not.

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[370] Judith Butler, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche', 199.

The language of *uti* is designed to warn against an attitude towards any finite person or object that terminates their meaning in their capacity to satisfy my desire that treats them as the end of desire, conceiving my meaning in terms of them and theirs in terms of me.[371]

Augustine warns[372] that there is a fundamental danger in mistaking *signum* for *res*. Machine-synthesised touch opens the risk that we interpret a signal as the thing itself, and this matters because part of the task of language is to explore the demarcation between *res* and *res*, in order that there might be a space for *caritas*, a space for grace to be discovered. Of course the relationship between human and machine may not be simple. Persons often invest emotion in machines, such as mobile phones for example, that is beyond the merely instrumental. Machines can be beautiful, or awesome. The more we recognise this tendency, acknowledging the beauty of the thing, and even laughing at ourselves for investing affectively in an object, the less risk there is that we confuse the creation with the creator. Digital communication demands that a *res* should be fixed in its *signum* — that it should be purely *uti*. "The sign chosen for itself as against the liberation towards the one true *res* offered by the final sign of Christ is being turned into a *pseudo-res*: symbolic practice has lost its innocence."[373]

In practice, as Merleau-Ponty explored in his posthumously published work, the act of touch is fraught with ambiguity and precarity. "There is a double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one."[374] Although every instance of touch is clearly a cultural event and occurs in the context of history and geography, it is as impossible to pin it down to a specific place and time as it is to determine who or what is the subject of the touch, and who is the object.

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[371] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*, 44.

[372] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 2.8, 9.

[373] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*, 52.

[374] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

> Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? Where in the body are we to put the seer, since evidently there is in the body only 'shadows stuffed with organs,' that is, more of the visible? The world is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the world ultimately. Instead, body and world are continuous, concentric, each going out toward the other and also folded back on itself.[375]

It is this sacramental precarity that is expressed in the tiny but unbridgeable void between the finger of God and the finger of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. No two people ever truly touch, except in a merely physical sense, and even then not so at an atomic level. And those who appear to touch are never entirely joined, but always eventually untouch. Nor can the *signum* of a touch ever be comprehensively described or contained in any other terms than itself. Williams understands our humanness to be entwined with risk, vulnerability, and failure to attain our desire for unity with the other. If the Venn diagram of meaning were ever to close into a perfect circle, the two subjects would become one. But, *pace* Genesis, the two never do "become one flesh", no matter how hard they try.

> We cannot escape our skins since this is what it means to be created. Our limitedness and vulnerability are the source of our dignity, but it is also a fountain from which numerous miseries have flowed, because we continue to reject our fragility, clinging to a desire for power and mastery.[376]

Nor can any human touch God in the 'plain' sense, or else there would be no distinction between creator and creation. All incarnate life, and the cross in particular, reveals the agonising distinction between God and creation.

> The unbridgeable distance between the eternal *res* and all earthly representation opens up through this 'anti-representation' that is the

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[375] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 134.

[376] Delport, 'Interior intimo meo', 493.

cross; yet in the recognition of distance is also buried the apprehension of gift or revelation.[377]

Perversely, this is a cause for thanks, because "the bizarre as well as the ambiguous has its place in preserving our openness to the final non-representable end of desire".[378]

> For Williams, the mysteriousness of personhood should not be sought in some pre-linguistic core; rather my own identity's 'ungraspable' quality is not 'an elusive level of interiority, but the unknowable presence of the creator's absolute affirmation, the mysteriousness of grace, past, present, and future, not of the 'true self' as a hidden thing'.[379]

It is in the space between, and the quest for understanding the other's meaning and desire, that the grace of God may become evident. It is the moments of greatest intimacy and mutual understanding that most clearly demonstrate the separateness of persons, and it is in the most intimate worship that persons best understand that they are not and can never be God.

> The moment of transparency that can issue from the intense exchange of words: where the fluidity of utterance itself […] so indicates or rather embodies its own unfinishable nature that it expresses or introduces the irreducible 'difference' of God.[380]

We touch an other, and we are touched, and we are left asking 'What could this mean?'

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[377] Williams, *On Augustine*, 36.

[378] Williams, *On Augustine*, 48.

[379] Delport, 'Interior intimo meo', 491, quoting Rowan Williams, 'The Suspicion of Suspicion', in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology,* ed. by Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 193.

[380] Williams, *On Augustine*, 51.

2   Machines touching machines: when two become one

For machines, including computers, there is no such space and no such pregnant questions. In a short polemical essay, N. J. Enfield writes that

> Machines aren't into relationships. Yet for us, relationships are pretty much all that matters. When we think, we don't just calculate, we worry about the social consequences. How might this decision affect others? How will it affect the way we interact next time? What will they think of me? Machines don't think like this. So there should be no illusion that we could socially interact with them in any meaningful sense.[381]

In relation to touch, the important factor here is that human beings do not simply touch without meaning. Humans always touch *because*, or *in order to*. This is to say, touch always happens in a cultural context, and with a cultural purpose. The discovery that follows is a process on the journey to what Williams calls adulthood. In contrast, when we describe machines as 'touching' we are referring merely to the collection or transmission of data, which has no significance until it is made to do something — which is to say, until it is expressed in a particular cultural form. Data is never entirely disembodied, but even when collected and stored in a physical medium, whether on a memory stick or in a trans-national data centre, the data itself has no meaning until it finds a cultural expression. The language of data stored in 'the cloud' only obscures the fact that all such data is insignificant until it is mediated in tangible form, and 'de-coded' in some cultural context.

Philosopher of technology Don Ihde insists that materially instantiated mediating technologies are never neutral with regard to human thought, action, or experience; rather, they transform the intentional subjectivities that engage them, thereby militating against the notion of a stable transcendental ego. As a correlate, media cannot be reduced phenomenally to transparent 'channels' of communication wherein pre-existing 'messages' or 'contents' are transported unchanged and without regard

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[381] N. J. Enfield, 'Machines Aren't Into Relationships', in *What to Think About Machines That Think*, ed. by John Brockman (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 397.

for the 'form' of their mediation.[382] Calvin had much the same understanding of the functionality of sacraments.

> We understand that a sacrament is never without a prior promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix (*tanquam appendicem quondam adiungi*), with the objective of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it clearer to us, and so to speak, ratifying it.[383]

Of course, it is possible for data to flow from one machine to another. But the suggestion that two machines might 'talk to' each other, 'learn from' each other, or 'share' information, must be used with great caution, for two reasons. The first is that any one machine has no immutable essence that can demarcate it from another machine. Williams, following Lossky, regards the human person as an irreducible unit. This is not true of a computer or other machine. The ontological boundaries of a machine are malleable. When two computers are joined by a lever or a cable they become effectively one larger machine or computer. When two or more machines interact with one another without de-coding information, they become, at least temporarily, one entity.

The second reason for caution is that expressions like 'talk to', 'share' or 'learn from' are themselves analogies grounded in causation. There is no ontological commonality between a human and a computer, but they are related because computers are caused by human beings. Concepts such as sharing or learning or touching that seek to describe and compare human and machine qualities are appropriate only because they flow from the act of creation, the fact that machines owe their existence and character to human craft. Those characteristics are not metaphorical, and unless they are used with care, those expressions can imply a cultural significance that does not

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[382] Reported by Shane Denson, 'Faith in Technology: Televangelism and the Mediation of Immediate Experience', *Phenomenology and Practice,* 5.2 (2011), 93–119.

[383] John Calvin, *Institutes,* IV.xiv.1, 3 (1559) in *Joannis Calvini: Opera Selecta,* vol. 5, ed. by P. Barth and W. Niesel (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1963), 259.1–261.3, in Alister McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 311.

attach to data until it has been expressed. There is a risk that metaphorical language that is separated from cultural expression becomes circular. That is no more than to say that computers are a bit like humans because humans display some characteristics that are a bit like computers. This issue will be discussed further in chapter seven.

Unlike computers, human beings cannot share raw data with one another, because unlike machines, humans cannot lose their individuated personhood. If you join two humans with a cable, or by the joining of hands, you do not end up with one human, but two humans in conversation. Information cannot be passed from one human to another without being expressed in a cultural context. And when such information is passed, the separate humans will not lose their individuated essence. There is a fundamental difference between two human beings meeting in the closest possible union, where it is *as if* they were one, and two machines meeting, where they unavoidably *become* one. In merging multiple essences into one, machines can do something that humans cannot do. Or if you prefer, in the immutability of their individual personhood, human beings have a unique quality that machines can never attain. That quality is the ability to meet without losing their essence — and it follows from that meeting that only humans can truly learn, share, or make love. This is what I mean by the sacramental nature of human touch. Perhaps ironically, the possibility of meeting without losing essence implies a lack of control of the results of such a meeting. Merleau-Ponty wrote that:

> I am not in space and time, nor do I think space and time; rather, I am of space and of time; my body fits into them and embraces them.[384]

Machines do not experience the risk or the thrill of this autonomy. This is why machines cannot cry, and only persons can laugh, because both crying and laughing require an individual to engage with that which is outside itself without losing its individuality.

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[384] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 141.

A machine may 'learn' in the sense that increasingly sophisticated algorithms can be developed, so that the information can be processed more effectively and deliver increasingly detailed information. But it cannot gather wisdom, because wisdom requires context — a sense of geography that tells us that we are not the centre of the world, and a sense of history that tells us that what is happening right now may not be the most important thing that's ever happened.

When we meet others, we don't meet depersonalised minds. We meet others only as incarnate, in bodies and faces and gestures. There is a necessary physicality in this, meaning that we can only fully meet others if we share space and time with them. The fact that I encounter the other in space and time is what makes the encounter meaningful and permanent.

> Just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other's body and my own are a single whole, front and back sides of a single phenomenon, and the anonymous existence, of which my body is continuously the trace, henceforth inhabits both bodies simultaneously.[385]

Merleau-Ponty's later essays on art are important here. He notes that skilled painters are often good at drawing and sculpture also, because their skill resides in a "system of equivalences".[386] Visual arts also have a voice of their own because they never simply mirror perception. A painted scene generates and acquires symbolic content. For example, if I look at a sculpture I can only see it from one angle. But without moving I am aware that it has sides and a back. If I see an image of a person in a painting I can imagine what they might look like from the other side. In that way, all art is located in space and time. If it were not so I couldn't make sense of it; it would just be a mass of colours and shapes. What Cézanne painted was not just what was in his mind, but what he felt the object meant.

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[385] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 370.

[386] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader,* ed. by Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: North western University Press, 1993), 142.

It is the fact that we engage the world from a place of inertia, a single point in space and time, that allows for us to have choice at all. It is because we are starting from here that we could choose to go to other places. It is the fact that ano*ther* person exists at a particular point in space and time that I cannot replicate which allows us to have a relationship dependent on choice and consent.

3   Aspects of a sacramental understanding of touch

What might it mean to understand touch in a sacramental framework, oriented on the incarnation of Christ? I am not using sacrament here in the sense of an ecclesial rite. Instead I am using the word 'sacramental' to describe a point of contact that has the potential to be a locus of grace, or in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's language, a place of 'dehiscence'. Williams describes sacramentality as a 'transition' in which "the presence and the power of the sacred are believed to be at work".[387] Put simply, a sacrament is a place where one plus one may result in more than two.

I will suggest five characteristics of touch that lend it this sacramental character. They are, first, that touch is essentially located. Second, that touch is self-interpreting; in other words, its meaning is not intrinsic but negotiated. Third, that because touch is a narrative sense as well as a purely physical one, it can never be wholly divorced from its cultural context. Fourth, that touch is a uniquely reflexive and therefore essentially relational sense. Fifth, and consequently, that touch cannot be depoliticized, but has individual and corporate moral dimensions.

My purpose in delineating these aspects will be to create a framework against which we can measure some of the impact of the development of digital culture, and the new modes of relationship that are made possible through digitally mediated or synthesised touch.

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[387] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 209.

3.1   Touch is essentially located

In 'On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith', Hugh of St. Victor wrote that

> A sacrament is a physical or material element set before the external senses, representing by likeness, signifying by its institution, and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace.[388]

In other words, to have a sacramental quality, touch must have materiality — a tangible location in space and time — and must be apprehended by the senses, as well as being recognised or designated as a sacrament. There is no such thing as a sacrament of the imagination, or an intangible touch. The materiality of the sacrament, as well as its designation as such, depends on the present actions of a person. In a liturgical setting it makes no sense to suggest that a priest could consecrate eucharistic elements that are located in another place, or in the past or future. A sacrament is a here and now thing.

What's more, there must be an analogy of some sort between *res* and *signum*.

> Every sacrament ought to have a kind of likeness to the thing of which it is the sacrament, according to which it is capable of representing the same thing.[389]

And again, "if sacraments did not have a likeness of the things whose sacraments they are, they would not properly be called sacraments".[390] A sacrament cannot be arbitrary, but must relate in some way to that which it signifies. This distinguishes it from a mere sign, which may not contain anything of its subject. For example, the letters 'd', 'o', and 'g' have nothing about them that necessarily pertains to a canine

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[388] Hugo of St Victor, 'De Sacramentis', IX.2, in McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, 298.

[389] Hugo of St Victor, 'De Sacramentis', IX.2, 299.

[390] Augustine, 'Letter XCVIII to Boniface', trans. by J. G. Cunningham, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* ed. by Schaff and Wace, 406.

animal, except for the cultural association that is made in the English language. To qualify as sacramental, there must be some analogy between a *signum* and its *res*. To be sacramental, an event must be to some degree a material representation of something immaterial. Whilst Teilhard de Chardin might stretch this to its extreme, 'extending' the eucharistic host to the entirety of creation, it is still material, "the pure majesty of the real itself",[391] the absence of nothing, which becomes the icon of divine presence.

In the same way, there is a necessary materiality about the sense of touch. When one person brushes against the skin of the other, there is a physiological event for both persons, located in space and time. Even if the agreement on the meanings (*signa*) of the touch (*res*) is incomplete or mysterious, there is an evented-ness; a congruity in time and space. It makes sense for a theological exploration to start with the brute fact of the materiality of touch because, as Rowan Williams has written, "the human vocation [is] to make reconciled sense of the material world of which we are part, articulating and serving its Godward meaning".[392] Whatever else it may be, touch is a material experience, with an eschatological significance.

Human beings can only know God and the world materially, through our bodies. How else could we know anything? Meredith Minister is one of many feminist theologians who reminds us that "bodies cannot be dismissed in pursuit of a God who is presumed to be immaterial and disembodied".[393]

The ground of this is the central doctrine of Christian faith, the incarnation of God in Christ. It is the sheer material particularity of God's presence in the world that defines

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[391] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe,* trans. by S. Bartholomew (London: Collins, 1965), 19.

[392] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 3.

[393] Meredith Minister, *Trinitarian Theology and Power Relations: God Embodied* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 109.

the sacraments of church and world thereafter. It is the fact that God in Christ touched and handled particular objects and people at a particular time and place that renders the possibility that material touch can be sacramental. I say 'can be', because the incarnation creates both a stumbling block and a choosing place.

One of the choices to be made is how far we believe the grace of sacramentality in touch extends. It is possible to argue from the Trinity and the *imago dei* that there is something unique about the dignity that attaches to human personhood, if only because we know ourselves and recognise others as persons. But does the sacramental possibility of touch extend to non-human creatures, or indeed to plant life, or to the whole created order?

John Zizioulas asserts that "all creatures possess a *hypostasis*, a mode of being",[394] but it is not certain that non-human creatures and inanimate objects have the freedom to express this hypostasis in relation to God. Might something sacramental happen when I stroke a dog, or feel the unique textures of a pebble, or even when I feel the weight and smoothness of a beautifully designed mobile phone? It is certainly possible to form an affective attachment to an animal, a landscape or an artefact, so the experience can hardly be without sacramental potential. The stone that I cherish because it reminds me of a special place can in a limited way open me to an experience of grace and thanksgiving, and its physicality is a part of that, even though it is unresponsive. My pet cat, on the other hand, has a far greater capacity to respond to my affectionate stroking, and also to let me know when she is not in the mood for it. That is why I can throw the stone into the sea with a clear conscience, but if I throw the same stone at the cat I know that I have transgressed a relational boundary. It looks as though there is an appropriate scale of dignity for differing parts of the creation, with no part being wholly insignificant, and human persons having a unique and primary status because they are "*endowed with the freedom to reflect divine*

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[394] John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2006), 95.

personhood in creation. And it is *divine* personhood alone that can be the model of true personhood."[395]

It might seem obvious that touch has materiality, but if one could conceive of touch that is material but impersonal, such as the touch of a person that has been synthesized or digitally mediated by a machine, could it then be a means of grace? Or is this exchange of grace only possible between persons, as between a person and God.

This question was tested in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when churches were forced to explore what it meant to gather online rather than in person. There was a great deal of debate about whether the eucharist could be celebrated if the congregation, and the eucharistic elements, were dispersed. Could bread and wine be effectively consecrated if priest and congregation were not physically present to each other, but were connected online? Did it make any sense to speak of breaking bread, when the bread had not at any point been whole? Is the efficacy of communion as a locus of grace dependent on congruity of time and space, the meeting of embodied persons?

These were not entirely new questions. They had been asked over the previous two decades, in the context of online or 'virtual' church gatherings. The Roman Catholic church offered its definitive answer:

> Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the Internet.[396]

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[395] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 95. [Italics original].

[396] Roman Catholic Church Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and the Internet*, (2002) <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html> [Accessed 16 September 2023].

Others, such as the Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes, were more open-minded:

> An avatar can receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist *within the logic of the virtual world* and it will still be a means of grace, since God is present in a virtual world in a way that is suitable for its inhabitants. We may expect that the grace received by the avatar will be shared in some way by the person behind the avatar, because the person in our everyday world has a complex relationship with his or her persona.[397]

This was a development for Fiddes from his earlier position that sacramental elements are always comprised of "pieces of earthly stuff",[398] or at least it was a recognition that the earthly stuff might include not just material stuff such as silicon chips and electrons, but even less tangible stuff, such as places or ideas.

Some elements of the church's response to the COVID-19 lockdowns were common to almost all approaches. For example, those asking whether bread and wine could be consecrated online still tended to use physical elements in the celebration, even if those elements (the bread and the wine) were dispersed in different homes. Some churches had prior experience of 'extended communion' for people who were sick or housebound, in which elements that had been consecrated in one place and time were consumed at another. Now, in online communion, elements that were consecrated in different places were consumed at the same time. For many it felt like a concession for a community temporarily in exile, in which they were remembering the remembrance of gathered worship, and in that remembrance there was grace. An online eucharist was valid in as much as it was *like* a gathered eucharist. For others, such as Catholic theologian Katherine Schmidt, the impossibility of embodied presence

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[397] Paul S. Fiddes, *Sacraments in a Virtual World* (2018) (Symposium): The Virtual Body of Christ? Sacrament and Liturgy in Digital Spaces 16–19 April 2018, CODEC and St. John's College, University of Durham.

[398] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 281.

at the mass created a period of mourning and longing that was to be embraced, not bypassed.[399]

The issue of communion in a wholly virtual world is even more complex. Could an avatar in a computer game, which has no physical being, consecrate the eucharistic elements? And could such an avatar meaningfully receive communion? An avatar is undoubtedly part of the created order. It is an artefact, crafted ultimately by a human. It is akin to a digital glove puppet. It has no means of receiving grace, since it is not a person. But as Fiddes says, it might disclose grace in some complex way to its human creator or controller.

> Encounters between persons always involve the body. Words that are spoken are also embodied in looks, gestures and other bodily language. There is no such thing as a purely mental communication. Even between two [inter]net-users who only meet in virtual space there is bodily communication. Of course there is the use of the fingers to type and eyes to monitor the screen, but beyond this there is a commitment of the whole body to the interchange in a way that cannot be entirely rationally analysed. Those who have a 'virtual' social life know, or feel, that it still happens in some way through the body.[400]

Perhaps it is even possible for an avatar to disclose grace to another avatar, since each is eventually contingent on an embodied person with autonomy. Embodiment may be mediated in a variety of ways, including digitally, but in the absence of embodied persons there can be no encounter. There is no such thing as an imaginary or disembodied sacrament. In the same way, touch is essentially personal and therefore physical; it cannot happen nowhere. We cannot imagine what would happen if no people met. There is a meaning attached to contiguous contact in space and time that is not equal to the meaning of synthesised or purely imagined touch. We can imagine that a digital analogue of the sensation of touch might be mediated across time or

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[399] Katherine Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Lexington: Fortress Academic, 2021).

[400] Fiddes, *Participating in* God, 279.

space, but touch that is wholly synthesized, and does not have a personal location in time *or* space, cannot have a meaning. If nobody touches nobody, it means nothing.

On the other hand, behind every machine there is a person or persons somewhere, albeit unknown. Even the touch of a machine connects two persons, just as a person touching a desk is distantly connected to the carpenter who made it. In a similar way, behind every teledildonic device there is a person, however distant. Digitally mediated sexual contact cannot be meaningless, though its meaning may be severely diminished and perhaps corrupted by the process of mediation. Even a sex robot has a human creator, or a series of creators, programmers, manufacturers and other intermediaries. Sexual intercourse with a robot cannot be without meaning, though the meaning is likely to have been severely attenuated by the production and transmission, as I will suggest in the closing chapters.

What might it mean for a mechanical touch to have the likeness of a human touch? Ironically it might not be the verisimilitude of the experience that enables the machine to represent a human touch, but the accessibility of the person who created or controls the machine. If there is no discernible difference between *res* and *signum* there can be no sacrament. Huldrych Zwingli wrote that

> the sacraments must be real sacraments, and not signs which are identical with the thing they represent. If they *are* the thing they represent, they are no longer signs: for the sign and the thing which is represented cannot be the same thing.[401]

Just as a sacrament must bear a likeness to that which it represents, so human touch that is wholly unlike a human touch cannot be a means of grace. A sacramental theology of touch will therefore mistrust abstract spirituality, and reject an appeal to body-soul dualism.

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[401] Huldrych Zwingli, 'Huldrych Zwingli on the Nature of Sacraments', in McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader,* 311.

In the case of a machine-generated touch there may be no discernible difference between the event and that which it represents. In this case the sacramental nature of the act is all but completely lost. It is critically important that we know whether we are touching or being touched by some*one* or some*thing*.

3.2   Touch always requires interpretation

When the physiological sensation of touch occurs, does it carry an intrinsic meaning that is complete in itself? Or does its meaning depend on interpretation and expression by the one who touches and the one who is touched? The answer to this question is important, because if an instance of touch can be regarded as complete in itself without cultural interpretation, then it would be theoretically possible to mechanically reproduce the sensation with no loss of meaning. You could in principle create a machine that wholly replicated the physical sensation of human touch. In this case it would make no apparent difference to the person being touched whether they were being touched by another person or by a machine, or even whether the physiological sensation of touch — the stimulation of Merkel discs or nerve fibres — was being artificially induced. It wouldn't even matter whether the person being touched knew that this was happening. If touch has intrinsic meaning, and that meaning is wholly embedded in physiological events, then it is a wholly objective and reproducible activity, and potentially free of cultural meaning.

In practice we know that the same physical sensation, such as a squeeze of the hand or a tap of a partner's foot under the table, can be construed, and as easily misconstrued, as encouragement or reproof, a gesture of love or a warning of danger. Maurice Merleau-Ponty put this bluntly in his *The Visible and the Invisible* when he wrote that "there is no brute world, there is only an elaborated world".[402] In Charles Taylor's thought, articulating and interpreting is what human beings do. "We must speak of man [sic] as a self-interpreting being, because this kind of interpretation is

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[402] Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 48.

not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence."[403] This is what separates humans (and to a lesser extent animals) from insensate forms. "Human life is never without interpreted feeling; the interpretation is constitutive of the feeling."[404]

Taylor argues that we cannot, in a reductionist or physicalist way, dismiss all human interpretation of experience as merely subjective, because this business of interpretation is fundamentally constitutive of who we are as persons.

> To say that man is a self-interpreting animal is not just to say that he has some compulsive tendency to form reflexive views of himself, but rather that as he is, he is always partly constituted by self-interpretation, that is, by his understanding of the imports which impinge on him.[405]

The claim is that our interpretation of ourselves and our experience is constitutive of what we are as persons, and therefore cannot be considered as merely a view on reality, separable from reality. Rowan Williams also sees the response to external stimulation as constitutive of personhood, in that "revelation is addressed not so much to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to 'open itself'."[406] Being human means that we respond to a call from outside ourselves to make choices about how we interpret touch, amongst other sensations, and how we express them. For Taylor, the business of hermeneutics is an unavoidable component in the human sciences: "We are language animals, we are stuck with language."[407]

It is curious, then, that for all the fine tuning of our physiology when it comes to touch, we rely on a relatively limited semantic range to describe it. Almost everything we

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[403] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 65.

[404] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 63.

[405] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 72.

[406] Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology,* 2.3 (1986), 209.

[407] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 72.

experience is expressed on a spectrum of wet–dry, cold–hot, rough–smooth, and so on.

In contrast, the sense of touch itself has a particularly rich range of metaphorical applications, most of which are descriptive of human relationships. So we speak of *getting in touch*, or *losing touch*, or we find someone's emotional involvement *touching*. More generally, we sometimes speak of a person having *the human touch*, when we simply mean that they are empathic or emotionally intelligent. More particularly they might have *a woman's touch,* implying a stereotypically feminine sense of style, or the more mysterious *magic touch* (or even *the Midas touch*) suggesting an ability to achieve the impossible. All of these phrases are analogies for various traits of character. Physical touch is not necessarily implied by any of them.

In a negative register, someone is *a soft touch* if they are easily persuaded or conned, or simply *touchy* if they are deemed to be emotionally over-sensitive. In a similar way, a person may be deemed *unfeeling* or *callous* or perhaps *tactless*. Matthew Ratcliffe[408] notes that tactile metaphors that describe difficult relationships with people such as calling someone *thin skinned* or saying that they *get under one's skin* often use imagery that emphasises skin as a boundary.

Calling a person *touchy-feely* if they tend to expose their emotions through physical contact is mildly disparaging. The phrase emerged in the 1970s, and originally referred back to the 'encounter groups' of the 1960s, in which participants were encouraged to explore their emotions through physical contact. If they are deemed to be *out of touch* with reality they may be said to have *lost their grip*. Even more disparagingly, people with mental impairments were sometimes said to be *touched in the head* or just *touched*, though this is archaic. Its origins were not necessarily disparaging in that people who were not neurotypical were thought to have been touched in the head by the grace of God.

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[408] Ratcliffe, 'What Is Touch?', 413–432.

Numerous secondary analogies for human emotional responses relate to skin contact, such as *rubbing someone up the wrong way*, *stroking their ego* or giving them a metaphorical *pat on the back*. According to your perceived level of emotional responsiveness you may be *thick skinned* or *thin skinned*. You may regard someone as *cool* or *hot*. An irritating person or issue may *get under your skin*, though it may be *no skin off my back* (which may originally have referred to immunity from judicial flogging). Conversely, if I feel sorry for you, I might express that simply by saying that *I feel for you*. If so, I might *reach out* to you, or alternatively *keep you at a distance*.

A further range of secondary analogies relates touch to understanding. A person may be said to *grasp* a point or *get hold of* an issue. This may stem from early Middle English, when the word *touch* was related to *test*, meaning validate. So a *touchstone* was a tool made of quartz, used from the late fifteenth century to test the quality of gold and silver alloys. It was later used metaphorically for any means of verifying genuineness or value of information or ideas.

Of course, other senses have their own distinct contributions to describing human interactions. Those associated with smell, such as *smelling a rat* or *smelling fishy* are predominantly negative. John Hull *points out* that

> attitudes, intentions, demands and references to knowledge and understanding are all suggested by the use of visual metaphors. There is an intimate connection between seeing and knowing.[409]

So we ask about someone's *point of view*, or seek their *observations*.

It may seem strange that this profusion of tactile analogies is used with such diverse and ambiguous meanings, until we remember that, probably more than most forms of nonverbal communication, touch itself is ambiguous. Brenda Major points out that

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[409] John Hull, *Touching the Rock* (London: SPCK, 1990), 25.

> Touch is used to communicate such varied emotions as extreme aggression, comfort, and intimate love. The message communicated by touch is a function of a number of variables including its duration, intensity, location, intentionality, the nature of the relationship in which it occurs, and the context in which it occurs.[410]

Two things are striking about the interpretive metaphorical uses of touch. The first is how closely they are related to the nature of human personhood. No-one speaks of objects being *a soft touch*, or of animals *rubbing each other up the wrong way*. It wouldn't make sense to describe a machine as *thin skinned*, or to suggest that an animal was *out of touch*. The second is how much we draw on images of touch when we want to talk about the relationship *between* persons. Semantically at least, touch is the sense that we use to stand for the empathic and emotional state of relationships between persons. The sacramental nature of touch is evidenced in the way that we reach out for the language of touch when we want to express what is passing between us.

There is, of course, a problem in the hermeneutics of touch, as with every other experience. Another person may not 'see' or accept the way we have interpreted experience. It is all but impossible to describe to another person what we are feeling when we touch something. We can only do so on the basis of shared language, and then only in a context of trust. We may draw on a shared schema, but we cannot wholly rely on it. At worst, I may not be able to confidently interpret what I am feeling to myself, let alone share it with an other.

This uncertainty is part of the human predicament. Some will not settle for uncertainty, insisting on a reductive, rationalist interpretation. Others, like 'Doubting' Thomas, will look for an unattainable empiricist route, saying "Unless I see the marks

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[410] Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behaviour', 15.

in his hands […] I will not believe."[411] Taylor describes such rationalism as "sterile" and failing to accommodate important dimensions of human life.

Whilst we are constantly reaching out for language to interpret and articulate experience — including the meanings of touch — we are doomed to incompleteness, just as Cezanne was doomed to inadequacy in his painting. Taylor explains that

> The short answer to why complete articulacy is a chimera is that any articulation itself needs the background to succeed. Each fresh articulation draws its intelligibility in turn from a background sense, abstracted from which it would fail of meaning. Each new articulation helps to redefine us, and hence can open us up new avenues of potential further articulation. The process is by its very nature uncompletable.[412]

The interpretation can never precisely express what is being interpreted. When I touch you, what you feel and what I feel are different. They may have a level of coherence, if they are felt and expressed within overlapping schemas, but they cannot be identical. We may reach for a common understanding, but I just can't express what I feel in a way that you will understand precisely.

Taylor worries about the breakdown of this consensus in terms of politics — people no longer understanding each other enough to negotiate common ways. My own primary concern is with the way that human–machine inter-action strips so much of the meaning and sacramental possibility out of the experience of touch. No instance of touch exists simply as a physiological reality. In order to have meaning, it must i) have meaning for a *subject*, ii) have meaning *about* something, and iii) have meaning in a *field*, i.e., in relation to other things. It must exist within a culture and a narrative. It must have significance beyond its physiology. A machine may be able to synthesise touch, but that touch cannot have a meaning that shares a schema with a person

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[411] John 20:25.

[412] Charles Taylor, 'Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger', in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger,* ed. by Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 328.

being touched. If a machine hits me, I don't expect it to say 'sorry'. It cannot possibly have meant to do what it did, except in as much as someone was operating or programming it. If a machine was acting of its own accord, what it did literally meant nothing to it. Even a dog knows the difference between being kicked and being tripped over, but a machine does not. As the person in the relationship between person and machine, I have the monopoly of language. I alone have the responsibility to understand and interpret the blow. If I don't know whether the machine was acting on its own accord or being directed by another person, I have a problem.

3.3 Touch is a narrative sense

Christianity is fundamentally a narrative religion; a religion that is 'storied', both in terms of language and of grammar. It is the story of God's option to inhabit human history, and of the consequent process of making and re-making that is summoned out of humans, which is "irreducibly bound up with language and culture, and so with 'transformative action'".[413] Williams describes cultural life as 'conversation' or 'sign-making', and Jesus himself as a 'sacrament', "a sign-maker of a disturbingly revolutionary kind." The macro-narrative of God's relationship with creation is captured in the Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:6–11, describing the process of the incarnation and humiliation of Christ as perceived in human time and space, and Christ's subsequent exaltation and glorification. The micro-narrative is played out in the events and encounters of the gospels, as we shall see in the next chapter. At every level, God's engagement with human beings is experienced and expressed in the form of story.

In their liturgical context, sacraments also have an essentially narrative form. They are a re-enactment in the present of the historical actions of Jesus, which are in themselves emblematic of God's actions in relation to God's creation. In participating

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[413] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 197.

in the liturgy, each individual and the church as a whole participates in the re-enactment in their own bodies. This dynamic re-enactment, in which touch is arguably the foundational sense, becomes a locus of grace. Alexander Schmemann is attracted to the image of Eucharist as a way by which a believer must travel. It is not, he insists, the "isolated moments, formulas and conditions of validity" with which theologians are too often obsessed, but part of the journey to the Kingdom.[414] We go on a journey, and find ourselves not in another place, but in the same place transformed.

Karl Rahner indicates that the history of salvation which is re-enacted in the eucharist is not limited to that event, but is "identical with the life of man [sic] as a whole".

> The history of salvation and grace has its roots in the essence of man which has been divinized by God's self-communication. We are not people who have nothing to do with God, who do not receive grace and in whom the event of God's self-communication does not take place until we receive the sacraments. Wherever a person accepts his life and opens himself to God's incomprehensibility and lets himself fall into it, and hence wherever he appropriates his supernatural transcendality in interpersonal communication, in love, in fidelity, and in a task which opens him even to the inner-worldly future of man [as an individual] and of the human race, there is taking place the history of the salvation and the revelation of the very God who communicates himself to man, and whose communication is mediated by the whole length and breadth and depth of human life.[415]

God communicates with us in the precarity of our life-stories, and in our actions we communicate God with others. A key vehicle for that communication is touch, so much so that when people describe an episode that appears to have a sacramental quality they will often describe it as being 'touched' by the hand of God.

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[414] Alexander Schmemann, *The World as Sacrament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 29.

[415] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2019), 411.

Touch is an essentially narrative medium. One of the distinctive physiological qualities of touch as compared to the other senses is that there are receptors dedicated to noticing the beginning and the end of the touch sensation. Alongside the Merkel disks near the surface of the skin are 'Meissner corpuscles', and at the same deep level as the Ruffini endings are 'Pacinian corpuscles'.[416] Meissner corpuscles and Pacinian corpuscles sense movement, but they fire their nerve fibres only at the start and finish of a touch experience. In other words, these specific receptors sense the beginning and end of touch. This is different from the ear, for instance, which has no receptors dedicated to identifying the beginning or end of a sound. This unique physiological property of touch is important, as it enables the brain to interpret touch not merely as sensation but as process. The physiology of touch has a built-in narrative dimension that inevitably gives it a cultural meaning. Any instance of touch is never simply a neu(t)ral event, but a story.

Perhaps more than any other characteristic, the storiedness of touch is evidence of its sacramental qualities. Paul Fiddes describes sacraments as "signs which enable us to participate in the drama of death and resurrection which is happening in the heart of God" and "doors into the dance of perichoresis in God".[417]

What we can say, then, is that whenever a person experiences touch, something is proceeding that is of significance beyond the bare clash of atoms. There is always a before and an after. Even when a person touches a so-called inanimate object — which we do all of the time as part of our very existence — there is some precarity in the narrative of relationship between the self and the created world. How did this occur, and what is going to happen next? But when a person touches another person, the significance is of a different order. The story being played out may involve woundedness, or healing, or something else, but it is sacramental, in that it can never be entirely meaningless.

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[416] See chapter 1.5 of this thesis, 'A Brief Note on the Physiology of Touch', 25-26.

[417] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 281.

This in turn means that all touch takes its place in a wider cultural narrative. Katherine Hayles writes that:

> Experiences of embodiment, far from existing apart from culture, are always already imbricated within it. Yet because embodiment is individually articulated, there is also at least an incipient tension between it and hegemonic cultural constructs. Embodiment is thus inherently destabilizing with respect to the body, for at any time this tension can widen into a perceived disparity.[418]

Every instance of touch has a place in the world's story, and at the same time, every instance of touch changes the world, be it the touch of a potter moulding clay, or the touch of a lover crafting a relationship. The environment in which we exist, which gives us our meaning, and in which we make meaning, is made up almost exclusively of things that are the result of the touch of human hands. Touch takes its place in culture, but touch also destabilises. Touch is sacramental in the sense that when a human touches an other, something always happens. It is the uncertainty about how we got here, and particularly about what will happen as a result, that gives touch a sacramental quality of precarity.

3.4 Touch is essentially relational

Touch is the boundary between myself and the world, and also the place where I act on the world and it acts on me. There is an essential relationship between space and solitude, between touch and relationship, between activity and time. We move between the two poles of touching and not touching, holding and letting go, attachment and detachment. In every case, the relationship is reflexive. It takes two to touch.

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[418] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 197.

This is one of the ways in which touch differs from the other senses. You can see something without being seen; you can hear something without being heard; but it is not possible to touch something without being touched. Touch is therefore the uniquely reflexive sense — the only sense that is necessarily relational. Comparing touch to sight, Hans Jonas writes that

> touch is the sense, and the only sense, in which the perception of quality is normally blended with the experience of force, which being reciprocal does not let the subject be passive; thus it is the sense in which the original encounter with reality as reality takes place.[419]

There is a paradox close to the surface here, because although touch is the means by which I am able to encounter the world and exercise force upon it, rather than simply observing it, touch is also the place where I become most aware of the deep difference in principle between myself and my environment. It is in person–person relationships that we test this interplay of differentiation and undifferentiation to its limit. When two humans seek to become 'one flesh', they discover just how possible, and also how truly impossible that is.

There is mystery here, and ambiguity, as there is in any sacramental experience. Rahner says of the experience of sacrament that "the dialectical unity, relationship and non-identity between the individual person as an individual and as a member of the community"[420] is dissolved. In other words, in the sacrament you don't know whether you are one, or part of a whole. Like a loving couple holding hands for a long period, it may be impossible to tell who is holding whose hand, or quite where one person begins and the other ends.

Neither is the relationship between action and reception equal nor simple, as Merleau-Ponty understood.

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[419] Hans Jonas, 'The Nobility of Sight', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* 14.4 (1954), 516.

[420] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 428.

There is never any pure exteroceptive reflex – that is, one that needs only the intervention of an external stimulus in order to exist. All reflexes demand the concurrence of a multitude of conditions in the organism external to the reflex arc.[421]

In other words, you can't simply say that 'something external happened in nature, and I saw/felt/smelled it'. The happening and the response are a complex of conditions and cultural factors that are unique. This is illustrated clearly by the sexual response. It is a complex combination of external events, sensory stimuli and subjective conditions.

This non-equivalence between the action and response is central in considering the meaning of touch that is generated by an object such as a machine. The definition of a machine is that it is mechanical, external and not a person. In particular, a machine can only respond to a stimulus with an equal, measurable and unconsidered reaction. A machine does not have a cultural schema in which its response might become complex and nuanced.

Every sign must be a sign *of* something. Theodore Beza, writing in the sixteenth century on the efficacy of the sacraments, said

We use the word 'sign' in explaining the sacraments, not to designate something ineffective, as if something were represented to us merely by a picture or memorial or figure, but to declare that the Lord, by his singular goodness, in order to help our weaknesses, uses external and physical things to represent to our external senses the greatest and most divine things which he truly communicates to us internally through his Spirit.[422]

Every touch that is made or received intentionally by a person bears a meaning, and the meaning is rooted in the persons and not just in the physiological act. The

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[421] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Structure of Behaviour*, trans. by Alden L. Fisher (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1965), 17.

[422] Theodore Beza, 'Confessio Christianae Fider', in *Tractiones Theologicae* (Geneva, Jean Crispinus, 1570-82), vol. 1, 26–7, in McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, 315.

effectiveness of the communication depends on its reception — and of course a machine can neither consent nor refuse to be touched, nor can it make meaning from the experience.

3.5 Touch is necessarily political

Sacramentality can only occur at what John Bell and Graham Maule have memorably called 'a touching place'[423] made by Christ with his 'friends'. Touch shares this core characteristic of sacramentality, that it is constituted in and by community. There is no possibility of a sacrament to which there is only one party. Indeed, touch always involves one community meeting another community. As a consequence, touch is unavoidably politically and morally constructed. In this context I am not using 'political' in the narrow sense of organisational or national governance, but in its broadest sense, to mean that touch involves the non-explicit interplay of various forms of power vested in two or more persons, such as that which occurs in a domestic relationship or a hierarchical organisation. The regulation of touch and gesture, its employment and restriction, are intrinsic to the enactment of hierarchy between leaders and citizens, educators and students, lovers and beloved, and priests and people. When a politician kisses a baby on the election trail, or when a bishop lays her hands on an ordinand, the meaning of the touch goes beyond its immediate expression. The same is true of the touch of friends or lovers. When two people touch, something happens that is beyond the merely mechanical or biological. It cannot be without meaning, however uncertain or contested that meaning might be. What is more, there is, whether intentionally or unintentionally, an enactment of power relations. There is necessarily an imbalance of power which is both created and reinforced by touch.

One example is the long-standing tradition of the royal touch for healing. On Easter Sunday 1608, Henry IV touched no fewer than 1,250 persons suffering from

[423] John L. Bell and Graham Maule, 'A Touching Place', *Iona Abbey Music Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Resource Group, 2003), 136.

lymphadenitis, commonly called scrofula or 'the King's Evil'. He made the sign of the cross on each of the subject's cheeks, and touched their sores. He then gave them a medal, which he had also touched, and proclaimed: "The King touches you, God cures you." Irrespective of how its therapeutic value might have been perceived, the King's Touch was a symbolic demonstration of one-sided power. Ironically, the King himself suffered from a severe skin complaint — and as Shakespeare points out in *Henry IV Part 2*, the body politic was itself diseased and in need of therapy that the monarchy could not provide.[424]

There are examples of 'the royal touch' as a means of healing in England and France from the time of Edward the Confessor onwards. The ceremonial provision of the King's Touch was regulated by Anglican clergy until well into the eighteenth century, and liturgy was provided in the Book of Common Prayer. It was conceived as a sacrament of healing — but inevitably it was also a locus of control; a means of asserting the power of church and monarch, their potency, and their subjects' dependence on him.[425]

The practice of the royal touch for healing has died out. Princess Diana's performative handshake with an AIDS patient at Middlesex Hospital in 1987 seemed calculated to make a statement of compassion rather than of power.[426] But the ecclesial formulas of

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[424] "*We are all diseased / And with our surfeiting and wanton hours*
    Have brought ourselves into a burning fever,
    And we must bleed for it; of which disease
    Our late King Richard, being infected, died."

Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part 2, iii. 4. (57-61) Shakespeare, William, *Henry IV Part II,* ed. by Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, Folger Shakespeare Library. Accessed 14 December 2024. Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library. https://folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-iv-part-2/

[425] Keith Thomas, 'Magical Healing: The King's Touch', in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 354–362.

[426] Princess Diana's handshake is the focal moment in the unpublished 2022 play 'Moment of Grace' by Bren Gosling. The author is interviewed at

touch as a condition of grace and the corresponding assertion of spiritual authority remain central to the sacraments of confirmation, ordination and consecration in Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches to this day.

As we have noted, when a human touches another human there is (in the term used by Merleau-Ponty) a dehiscence: a 'bursting out' of potential and actual meaning beyond the merely physiological event. Consequently and inevitably it has a political dynamic, because like all moments of sacramentality, this meaning is made in a cultural context, and is subject to the dynamics of power.

Paterson notes that "Individual actions and experiences […] take place within a specific cultural history that validates certain forms of touching but invalidates others."[427] The contested meanings of touch can create perplexing dilemmas. For example, in the light of multiple instances of abuse of children by adults in authority, some schools have considered 'no touch' policies, meaning that adult teachers were prohibited from touching students under any circumstances. But in April 2011 the Department for Education led by Conservative Secretary of State Michael Gove introduced guidance under which such policies were themselves banned.[428] The state was asserting a power over individual schools for the right to touch children, using force if necessary. When the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) made its final report to the UK government there were twenty recommendations. In its response, published in May 2023, the government accepted all but one of them.[429] They declined to accept

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<https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/07/05/princess-diana-aids-handshake-bren-gosling> [Accessed 2 Jan 2025].

[427] Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 156.

[428] 'New powers for teachers to improve discipline in schools' published by the UK Government Department for Education on 4 April 2011.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-powers-for-teachers-to-improve-discipline-in-schools> [accessed 23 November 2023].

[429] 'Government response to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse', May 2023, published by The UK Government Home Office, at

the need for a ban on the use of pain compliance techniques on children in custodial institutions. No touch can be politically neutral.

Before moving on to look at constructions of touch in the Biblical texts I will reflect briefly on two of the many aspects of the political nature of touch, in this case the gendered nature of touch, and the generative or abusive nature of touch.

3.5.1   Gendered touch

Male and female skin are different enough that most people could probably tell them apart by sight or touch with a fair degree of accuracy.[430] Even at a purely physical level, there are sex-related differences in anatomy, physiology, epidemiology, and the manifestations of several diseases. Curiously, though, according to a meta-study by Rahrovan, S et al., the mechanisms that underlie sex-related differences in skin diseases remain under-researched.[431]

Perhaps physiology is not the right place to start an examination of the gendered nature of touch. To begin there would be to make an assumption that sex differences are normative, or that the body itself is indivisible. As Elaine Graham points out,

> Notions of gender difference as deriving from fixed and innate characteristics, and women and men as occupying ontologically

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-the-final-report-of-the-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse/government-response-to-the-final-report-of-the-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse#executive-summary> [Accessed 13 January 2024].

[430] The thickness of the male epidermis tends to exceed 60 μm, while it rarely reaches 50 μm in women. Thus, a man's skin is, on average, approximately 20% thicker than that of a woman. There are more details in Eva McVitie et al., 'The influence of age and sex on skin thickness, skin collagen and density', *British Journal of Dermatology*, 93.6 (1975), 639–643.

[431] Rahrovan, S et al. 'Male versus female skin: What dermatologists and cosmeticians should know', *International Journal of Women's Dermatology,* vol. 4.3, 122-130.

different spheres by virtue of something called 'biological sex difference', have been contested by an alternative which sees gender as a relational rather than an abstract or reified term, and gender divisions as one fundamental dimension of the wider order of social relations.[432]

One of the leading voices in this constructivist discourse has been Judith Butler, for whom gender is fundamentally a form of social organisation. For Butler, it is culture rather than physiology that inevitably creates, and continually disrupts, notions of gender.[433] She believes that there is no body that is not 'performative' and therefore gendered. The implications of this in terms of gender diversity are huge. Thankfully we do not need to resolve this contestation to be aware that caution needs to be exercised in relation to the gendered nature of touch.

It is hardly surprising that women's experience and understanding of touch differs from men's. Major reports that "gender differences in touching patterns occur soon after birth and continue throughout adulthood."[434] Henley found that women reported a higher instance of being touched and of touching others than men did.[435] Henley also found that men and women of various ages reported that they were more likely to touch females than males.

The political meanings of touch are varied too. Given that personhood is invariably gendered, there can be no touch whose meaning isn't impacted by the power relations of the parties. For example, in almost all cases, a male teacher touching a

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[432] Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, (London: Mowbray, 1995), 217.

[433] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2011), xix.

[434] Brenda Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior' in Clara Mayo and Nancy M. Henley, *Gender and Non-Verbal Behaviour* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 21.

[435] Henley, N. M. *Body politics: Power. sex. and nonverbal communication* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

female student is understood very differently to a female teacher touching a female student.

In a review of research, Major found that agency had a greater impact than anything else in determining the meaning of touch.[436]

> The act of touch overwhelmed the impact of any other power indicators, namely, gender, age, and initial status. That is, regardless of the toucher's gender, age, or status, the toucher gained in perceived power relative to a person not touching. And regardless of the recipient's gender, age, or status, his/her power diminished relative to a person not touching.[437]

It is perhaps a further indication of the fluidity of gender constructs that Major writes that

> surprisingly, a woman's touch to a man is not perceived more negatively than a man's touch to a woman, even though the prior behavior is out of role. Whether a woman is touching a man or a man is touching a woman the message of power is the same.[438]

Classen provides a historical context for this. In the early Middle Ages, "touch, taste and smell were generally held to be the lower senses and thus were readily linked to the lower sex - women."[439] She says that women's connection with these 'lower senses' was grounded in the scriptural account of the Fall,[440] in which the proto-woman Eve was said to have brought sin into the world through her inability to

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[436] Both Henley and Major, writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, make a distinction between 'touching' as the action of a subject (the toucher), and 'being touched' as the passive experience of an object (the touchee, or person being touched). As I have discussed in chapter two, section six, Merleau-Ponty and others feel that the subject/object distinction cannot be made with such clarity.

[437] Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior', 26.

[438] Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior', 26.

[439] Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2012), 75

[440] Genesis 3:1-20.

restrain her covetous touch. As a result, the body of a woman represented the supreme enticement to sin, "the greatest of all obstacles in the way of salvation."[441] "The seductive touch of a woman was considered to rob men of their rational powers."[442] Consciously (in the case of witches) or unconsciously (in the case of virgins) feminine touch was a threat to men's self-control and therefore to their 'rightful' status as the leading sex.[443]

The moral and physical character of women's bodies was deemed to make some occupations more appropriate than others. The presumed coldness of their bodies meant that indoor work was preferable. Fineness of touch lent itself to activities like weaving and sewing, while softness of skin lent itself to nursing and child-rearing. This was no small distinction, says Classen, for "a woman out of her home...might be considered a woman dangerously out of place."[444] The exception was the cloistered life of the religious woman. One of the ways in which women might appropriately live into their moral and physical weakness was through 'pain craft', "the transformation of the raw material of suffering into the finished product of a sacrificial offering."[445] "Physical illness provided a valued means for devout women to attain holiness through bodily suffering."[446]

Against this deeply ingrained and centuries old cultural background, Maurice Merleau-Ponty showed surprisingly little interest in, or awareness of, the impact of culture or gender on individual perception. As a result, Paterson points out, his writings on

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[441] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

[442] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 76.

[443] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 91.

[444] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 79.

[445] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 88.

[446] Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 235.

embodied perception can be accused of being solipsistic, treating physical perception as a universal and undifferentiated experience.

> Despite writing floridly and with introspective insight about flesh and our embodied encounters with the world, Merleau-Ponty's subject remains indubitably abstract, singularly white, adult, able-bodied and male. His first-person generalizations only seem to perpetuate and reaffirm this generalized, individualistic subjectivity, and although insights into touch and tangibility recur throughout his writing, they are often posed or framed within visualistic terms. The abstracted, generalized bodies posited by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, then, tend to reinforce the binary of the 'normal' and the 'pathological'.[447]

Merleau-Ponty's blind spot is particularly unfortunate in relation to the gendered nature of touch perception. It is all the more surprising, given his close relationship with the trailblazing feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. The two were born in the same year, and after meeting in a lycée whilst on teaching practice in 1927, they remained close friends until his death. Yet Beauvoir could write in her diary that "I have a more complicated, more nuanced sensibility than his. Those problems that he lives in his mind, I live them with my arms and legs."[448]

The second wave of feminism, in which Beauvoir played an important part, and which was gathering momentum towards the end of Merleau-Ponty's life, articulated how the definition and construction of the body is the locus for struggles over the exercise of power. Jennifer McWeeny suggests that Simone de Beauvoir was different from her friend in her insistence that "flesh is a medium of existence that becomes amplified and disclosed in oppressive contexts, [and] nowhere is this ambiguous ontological

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[447] Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 156.

[448] Simone de Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, Vol. 1, 1926-27, ed. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, and Margaret A. Simons (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 293.

structure more visible than in the being of woman."[449] Touch played its part in this, with a recognition that both female and male bodies had a symbolic rather than purely utilitarian value. And yet Merleau-Ponty tended to treat the body as largely androgynous or sex-neutral, whilst Beauvoir made a clear gendered distinction in her understanding of perception, writing that "Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself."[450]

A permissive strand of identity politics suggests that the ways in which bodies touch or are touched is an entirely individual and subjective matter, strongly associated with notions of the individual's 'ownership' of their body as a possession. The rights of the 'owner' of the body are to be preferred to the rights of the 'other' who might touch it. A parallel example in relation to sight/gaze would be the Free the Nipple campaign, in which some women assert the right to display their breasts on equal terms with men.[451] This stands in apposition to the prurient publishing of celebrity 'nipple slip' photographs in newspapers and online, which is deemed an objectionable function of the male gaze. There is an assumed distinction between good *display* and bad *gaze*, in which the determining factor is not the sight of a nipple but the intention of the individuals — their right over the display of a body part which is taken to be a personal good.

In relation to touch there is an analogous distinction between good touch and bad touch, predicated on the intention of the one who initiates touch and the consent of

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[449] Jennifer McWeeny, 'Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty' in *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir,* ed. Laura Hengehold and Nancy Bauer (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 211.

[450] Simone de Beauvoir, 2009. *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 41. Originally published as *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) 67.

[451] See, for example, Rachel Kramer Bussell, ' Free the Nipple! The Problem With How We Think About Breasts' in Time.com (December 12, 2014). <https://time.com/3631924/free-the-nipple-breasts-sex-symbol> [Accessed 20 January 2025].

the one who is touched. Touch, like display, may be construed as an assertion of individuality, or an invasion of it. This emphasis on individual intention and consent, freighted with gender dynamics and the objectification of sexual touch, would have felt strange to the Medieval peasant or the nineteenth century factory worker, for whom touch was an altogether more casual, inevitable fact of everyday life.[452]

In the field of robotic technology, these structures and norms quickly make their way into the commercial offering, where they become equally inherent. Many prototype haptic robots have been designed to take over jobs that are typically undertaken by women, such as care work and sex work, and they are typically given female names. Almost all humanoid robots are construed as servants to humans, typically taking over tasks that are usually low paid and repetitive, in which women are over-represented.

In the case of touch, the only truly reflexive sense, the individualisation of rights is at its most complex. Alison Phipps delineates the way that neo-liberal values of choice jostle with repressive personal responsibility, and in the balance between agency and privilege, those with social and economic resources dominate. She reminds us that such choice "exists only between a predefined set of alternatives set by structures such as the market or religious institutions, which are reified and taken as given.[453] When considering the theological meanings of touch, it is essential to remember that Christian theology, language and practice do not simply reflect gender norms, but have also contributed to them.

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[452] Classen, *The Deepest Sense*, 2.

[453] Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 135.

3.5.2 Generative touch and abusive touch

The crucial role that touch, or tactile stimulation, plays in healthy emotional, intellectual, social, and physical development is widely accepted. Barbara Major's summative article demonstrates that

> generative touch is essential to the full development and sustaining of personhood. Touch deprivation produces developmental delay, and leads to attention deficit. It may be caused by stigma, may lead to aggression or violence, and can affect the immune response.[454]

Sara Wuthnow says that where touch has found a place in ministries of healing within the church it has usually been associated with powerful men.[455] Where touch was seen as a tool for spiritual healers this power was recognised by the church and brought under its control. By the time of Aquinas, sacramental touch was restricted to (male) clergy and was an emblem of transfer of power, for example at ordination or coronation.

The sacramental character of touch involves a condition of vulnerability. "Violence is potentially productive as well as destructive",[456] writes Erin Manning. There is always the possibility of generativity, but also of destruction. Rowan Williams sees the resurrection of Christ as a summative sacrament: an event of limitless possibility, which is not merely history, nor merely myth, but larger than both. It is "an event on the frontier of any possible language".[457] It is an event of rupture and discontinuity.

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[454] Brenda Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior', in *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior,* ed. by C. Mayo et al. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1981), 15–37.

[455] Sara Wuthnow, 'Healing Touch Controversies', *The Journal of Religion and Health,* 36.3, 1997.

[456] Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Brantford, Ontario: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2009), xix.

[457] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 89.

"Something has happened here that cannot be integrated into our experience; we have no adequate way to capture it or describe its meaning."[458] The underlying metaphor here is of trauma, which Williams understands through a Freudian lens.[459] The experience of traumatic touching, particularly in the context of physical or sexual abuse, is just such a fundamentally transgressive experience which, for many individuals, cannot be subsequently incorporated into their narrative, but remains the event that is beyond meaning, and so gives meaning to the rest of life.[460]

Writing in the context of the persecution by General Pinochet in Chile, William Cavanaugh says that "the purpose of torture is to destroy the person as a political actor".[461] In my own work on the theology of abuse I suggested that abuse can be defined as "a conscious invasion by a person with power, intended to violently challenge and destabilise the physical, sexual, cultural and spiritual identity of the Other".[462] Abusive touch is commonly (though not always) a central feature of this destabilisation. And since in its sacramentality, touch is constitutive of personhood, so abusive touch is perversely sacramental in its destruction of persons.

> In the humiliation of abuse, the victim discovers the reality of Christ, just as the abuser loses it. It is in the wounds of the victim that the humility

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[458] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 31.

[459] Williams, 'Freudian Psychology'.

[460] The revelations of abusive touch by evangelical leaders including John Smyth, Jonathan Fletcher, Mike Pilavachi and others, and the psychological and spiritual scars they have left on their followers many decades later, are a case in point. Much of this is discussed in my book *Bleeding for Jesus: John Smyth and the Cult of Iwerne Camps* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2022).

[461] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2010), 38.

[462] Andrew Graystone, *Falling Among Thieves: Understanding and Responding to Church-related Abuse*, Temple Tracts 23 (Chester: William Temple Foundation, 2022), 6.

of Christ is revealed. Any sense that a person can mark another with their own identity instead of the identity of Christ is blasphemous.[463]

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that human touch has quasi-sacramental qualities, not in an ecclesial sense, but because in common with other sacramental events, human touch creates a dehiscence, a locus of meaning that moves beyond the merely physiological and opens the possibility of grace. This sacramental quality is absent when two objects meet, such as when a stone falls to the floor, because neither the stone nor the floor has a conscious cultural schema with which to interpret the event.

This sacramental possibility is present in every instance of human touch, including when a person touches an object, because even an inanimate object 'lives' with the energy of its creator. A human foot touching the floor has greater potential meaning than the falling of a stone.

The opening for grace is categorically enhanced when one person touches another. Inter-personal touch is a material experience with an eschatological significance. This eschatological dimension, through which touch opens up possibilities for redemptive meaning beyond itself, will be the background to the survey of Biblical material related to touch in the chapter that follows.

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[463] Graystone, *Falling Among Thieves*, 7.

CHAPTER SIX

WHO TOUCHED ME?

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we
> have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have
> touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

<div align="center">1 John: 1:1</div>

<u>Developing understandings of touch in the Biblical texts</u>

In this chapter I will explore how the Biblical texts illuminate our understandings of
touch. I will suggest that the Old Testament texts demonstrate that the writers saw a
theological and cultural significance to touch in the community of early Israel that has
often been overlooked. I will then suggest that the New Testament writers bear
witness to a transformation in the understanding of touch, broadly from a vehicle of
contamination to one of blessing. Finally, I will consider how the accounts of the post-
resurrection appearances of Jesus point to a new eschatological understanding of
touch. This will become the basis for my reflection on the place of touch in
contemporary digital culture.

1   Introduction

In his essay on 'The Nature of a Sacrament', Rowan Williams writes that communities
exist by sign-making. That is how they define and make sense of themselves.[464]
Throughout the Bible narrative, various forms of touch are key signifiers of the nature
of the community. Significance is attached to the touching of sacred and foul objects,
the touching of persons, and the touching of the divine. Developments in these
meanings can be traced from the early Israel of the Patriarchal period, through the
gospels, and into the life of the early church. There are also hints of an eschatological
significance of touch in the post-resurrection narratives. Rowan Williams suggests that

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[464] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 218.

we should expect the Biblical narrative to be dynamic in its understanding of, e.g., touch, because it is describing a movement in the relationship of humanity to God.[465]

In this brief overview I will suggest that the texts present early Israel as a community substantially boundaried by such signs in the form of touch. In other words, who and what the people were required to touch, or to avoid touching, was the marker of their relationship with God. Physical touch delineated the boundaries between what was righteous and what was sinful. Touch always produced an effect. It was never a neutral action. It was the simple contiguity of bodies, and not the force behind the touch, that was impactful.

I will go on to suggest that the New Testament texts evidence a fundamental change in the significations of touch in the early Christian communities of faith. Broadly speaking, this was a move from touch transferring contamination to transferring blessing. I will consider as core texts two of the post-resurrection encounters of Jesus: first, his meeting with Mary recorded in John 20:17 in which he says "Do not touch me" (Μή μου ἅπτου, *mē mou haptou*), and second, his meeting with Thomas recorded later in the same chapter, in which the sceptical disciple is invited to touch his wounds.

I will suggest that this and other post-resurrection stories point to an understanding of touch located beyond place and time, that may offer clues in framing a theology of touch for a digital world.

The chapter begins with a brief contextual introduction, setting the Biblical understandings of the body in the philosophical environment of Hebrew, Greek and Roman thought. The theological significance of touch in the Old and New Testaments is then considered.

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[465] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 3.

2   The context of Early Israel

As we have discussed elsewhere, the understanding of the body, and consequently of touch, in any particular context, is contingent on the cultural framework of that context. They cannot be separated. This is self-evidently important in understanding the construction of touch across the many centuries of the Biblical communities, and of every community. For example, the dualisms of Hebrew and Greek philosophy (if that is how they should be described) are very different from the dualisms of Descartes and of the modern era. For that reason, this consideration of the understandings of touch evidenced in the texts of the Bible needs to start with some examination of the cultural contexts in which those texts emerged.

All theological anthropology, including that of the Bible texts, needs to be read through the cloudy lenses of our understanding of its contemporary philosophical milieu. This alone will save us from a naïve transfer of meanings to digital or other cultures. For example, Ola Sigurdson suggests that at the time of Descartes, medical scientists conceived the heart as a sort of machine.[466] In turn, the economy was conceived as a sort of heart, pumping wealth around the body politic. This is very different from the conception of the heart in Hebrew or Greek cultures, and different again from the ways that the heart is understood in the twenty-first century. Different cultures construct the human body differently, and this has a bearing on their phenomenological understandings of self and other, here and there. Likewise, there are differing understandings of body and soul or spirit, and of health and sickness. We owe it to our ancestors not to make simplistic miscategorisations in reading the texts we have inherited from them.

John Robinson[467] writes that Hebrew thinkers did not have a strongly developed understanding of the individuated human body. There is no Old Testament equivalent

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[466] Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology,* trans. by Carl Olsen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 303.

[467] J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London: SCM Press, 1952).

to the Greek concept of *sōma*, the essence of individuality that separates one from another. Rather, Early Israel was primarily interested in a being in their relation to God. Hans Walter Wolff puts it this way:

> It is not in a mirror that a man [in Early Israel] recognizes himself truly; it is in the call that comes to him and in the promise that he receives.[468]

Whilst it is true that various organs are used in Hebrew poetry to denote emotional or physical states (e.g., the *kābēd* (liver) as the seat of grief, the *lēb* (heart) as the locus of life and emotion), it is simplistic to imagine that they were seen in functional terms as discrete organs. Rather, they were understood as integrated parts of a whole construction, and in this context any organ could stand for the whole person. For example, in the Old Testament, a person's 'face' is far more important than their 'head'.[469] Face (*pānīm*) is always plural, and represents the direction in which a personality is oriented towards God and others. In the Hebrew Old Testament there are eighty words for body parts, but no word for the whole.[470]

In a similar way, the embodied individual was constructed as part of the whole community, and not in modern terms as an autonomous unit of meaning and agency. Although Hebrew culture and poetry recognised a variety of senses, they were not individuated in a way that correlates with the five (or however many) senses as they are popularly constructed in the twenty-first century. The senses were interlinked, and what was important about them, at least as it is conveyed to us by the writers of the Old Testament texts, was not their function in the individual body, but their symbolic

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[468] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (London, SCM Press, 1974), 76.

[469] This is reminiscent of Levinas' writing on the encounter of the Other via the face. See, for example, Diane Perpich, 'Levinas and the Face of the Other', in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas,* ed. by Michael Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 243–258.

[470] Robinson, *The Body*, 13.

role in relation to God and the community of faith. For example, the eye and the ear were often poetically juxtaposed as representing a person's orientation towards or away from God, as in

> The ear to hear with and the eye to see,
>
> Yahweh has made them both. (Prov. 20:12)

Early in the twentieth century, H. Wheeler Robinson introduced the concept of 'corporate personality' into Old Testament studies.[471] He suggested that Hebrew thought did not distinguish between separate objects in the way that modern thought does. In particular, Robinson believed that the identity of an individual might not be clearly distinct from the identity of a community or tribe. A vessel might be continuous with the person who carried it, or a diseased individual with the disease they suffered. There is something analogous to the concept of the 'body corporate' in English law. Whilst rejecting the application of Cartesian dualism to Hebrew philosophy, Wheeler Robinson said that "the Hebrew idea of personality is an animated body, not an incarnated soul".[472]

In modernity, when we speak of the social body, we are using a metaphor for individual bodies interacting. But Dale B. Martin writes that "In the ancient world, the human body was not like a microcosm; it *was* a microcosm – a small version of the universe at large."[473] The assumption was that the human body was made of the same stuff as the world around it, and the same forces that acted on the world outside the body (e.g., the weather) also acted on the world inside the body.

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[471] H. W. Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1947).

[472] H. W. Robinson, 'Hebrew Psychology', in *The People and the Book,* ed. by Arthur S. Peake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 362.

[473] Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 16.

The phenomenological implications of this are profound. Are we to understand that Hebrew persons experienced themselves in a continuous whole with the universe, and that their sense perception was determined by this? If this is the case, then perhaps such people did not feel themselves to be existing in a world of external 'things' that they could see, hear and touch. Instead they existed in a world of what Ernst Cassirer called 'mythopœic thought'.[474] They would not have broken sensory experience into its constituent and comparable elements: colour, size, weight, sound, etc. Instead they would have received the world and its objects, and each other, as integral parts of a whole experience. This is somewhat similar to the continuity between person and world that Maurice Merleau-Ponty appeared to be exploring in his late, unpublished work. The demarcating factors, Cassirer suggests, were not individuated personae, but space and time. By this he means that some places were understood as distinct and sacred, and so were some seasons. Some Old Testament scholars, such as H. and H. A. Frankfort[475] and G. E. Wright,[476] have built on this thesis to suggest that the awareness of space and time, and therefore of the narrative action of God in the sensational world of humans, is evident in the Old Testament narratives as a primary distinguishing factor of the early people of Israel. Others, such as J. W. Rogerson,[477] believe that this is to take the argument too far. But there is a clear sense at least in the earlier documents of the Old Testament that both God and the world were perceived by humans in narrative terms.

Whatever the precise phenomenological understandings behind the Old Testament accounts, it is clear that when we read of one person touching another person, or of a person touching an object, or of God touching a person, we are to understand the

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[474] E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2, Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

[475] H. Frankfort and others, *Before Philosophy* (London: Pelican, 1949).

[476] George Eldon Wright*, The Old Testament Against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

[477] J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 46–65.

whole person being effectively (though not literally in the twenty-first century understanding) in contact with the other. We should not imagine, for instance, that if a person touched a ritually unclean object with their hand, that hand alone would become unclean, as if it had picked up a dusting of soot. In Hebrew thinking at the time of Early Israel, the body was unitary, so the whole person became unclean through the touch of the hand. The body was also to some extent subsumed into co-existence with the community, and with the extended environment. There was a strong sense that the universe was divided between 'us' and 'that which is beyond us'; 'us' meaning God's people, and 'that which is beyond us' meaning God's self. Apart from that there were only God's enemies, who were uniquely (and terrifyingly) outside.

3   Touch in the Old Testament

We have established above that the meanings of touch in the Old Testament are to be discerned in the context of the understanding of the body in relation to wider social and religious structures. Anthropologist Mary Douglas notes Israel's concern for issues of bodily integrity and purity, in a context in which the whole nation was often threatened and compromised by other tribes, by disease, and by the harsh climate in which they existed.[478] In the patriarchal period, touch was used to constitute and define the community of early Israel through laws and rituals of inclusion and exclusion, restoration and commissioning. It was involved in the mediation of powers, rights and privileges between one person and another. Sometimes, this takes a cultic form, as in the various instances of 'laying on of hands', in which blessing, healing, authority or judgement were transferred from one person with a particular gifting or authority to another. Touch also had a key role in the holiness codes of the Old Testament, where it might lead to the transfer of contamination, resulting in

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[478] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

temporary or permanent exclusion from the community, and also in the sacrificial rituals for dealing with guilt and restoring status.

Gerhard von Rad described the emergence of Jahwism as separate from and distinctive amongst the cults of the Ancient Near East. It was distinguished by the rejection of magical thinking and a turn toward "the material force of what was holy or unclean, and to the possibility of its transmission".[479] One result was that the emergent Israel was constituted by laws that focussed on the distinctively material boundaries of the community, defined by a complex body of sacral regulation. In von Rad's words,

> There was absolutely no meeting-ground with, or participation in, the divine otherwise than by submitting to these sacred regulations which governed both their life as a community and their dealings as farmers with their physical environment.[480]

Who and what the people touched or avoided touching was the marker of their relationship with God. Physical touch delineated the boundaries between what was righteous and what was sinful.

Rowan Williams illustrates this in his essay on 'The Nature of a Sacrament', when he says in reference especially to Leviticus 19 to 26:

> The separateness of the people of Israel, and the separations between holy and profane enforced within the nation in the realms of food and sexuality are explained by reference to the absolute untouchable holiness of God.[481]

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[479] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, vol. 1*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (London: SCM Press, 1975), 34.

[480] von Rad, Old Testament Theology, 33.

[481] Williams, On Christian Theology, 202.

An early example occurs in Genesis 20:6, when Moses is travelling with his wife Sarah (whilst passing her off as his sister) in the territory of Gerar where Abimelech is king. Abraham offers Sarah to Abimelech, but he is saved by God's intervention from having sex with her, and thereby violating the physical boundary of the sacral community. God says to Abimelech in a dream, "I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore, I did not let you touch her."

Julia Kristeva suggests that the Levitical laws on menstrual blood and childbirth were markers to detach Israel from foreign goddess cults.[482] Much later, and in stark contrast, a Syrophoenician Woman was to successfully challenge Jesus' praxis, marking a new dynamic of hospitality and inclusion.[483]

Similarly, the multiple injunctions against adultery and intermarriage maintain the physical boundaries of the community. So, for example, in Proverbs 6:28–29:

> Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is the one who sleeps with his neighbour's wife; Whoever touches her will not go unpunished.

In a similar way God promises to protect God's own people from the unwelcome touch of hostile nations. "For thus says the LORD of hosts, 'After glory He has sent me against the nations which plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye.'" (Zechariah 2:8-9).

In this way, the earliest Yahwists defined themselves against other tribes, not by the territory they occupied, but by monotheism expressed in rigorous corporeal separation from their neighbours. Thus was inculcated a bodily holiness, in which relationship with God was expressed through physical contact or separation from

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[482] Julia Kristeva, 'Semiotics of Biblical Abomination', in Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 90–112.

[483] Mark 7:24-30.

other people and objects in time and space. The sacredness invested in the ark of the covenant was paralleled by that attached to the human body itself. It is easy to see how this translated into an intensely powerful metaphor of persons being ceremonially clean or unclean. The distinctive idea attached to ceremonial uncleanness among the people of early Israel was that it cut a person off for the time being from social privileges, and left his citizenship among God's people in abeyance.

3.1   Touch in the transfer of contamination

Such was the significance of touch in the formation of the community that the maintenance of ritual cleanness (*taher*), and uncleanness (*tamē*) amongst the people of God are major themes in the Pentateuch. Whilst there were some individual factors that could make a person ritually unclean, such as skin disease or vaginal discharge, the importance of materiality in defining the community against others means that to a large extent, uncleanness was contracted by physical contact with persons, objects or animals that were themselves considered unclean. Contamination was substantially passed on by touch. Because the material integrity of the community was directly related to the exclusivity of the early Israelites' relationship with God, contamination was associated with apostasy and guilt, and cleansing was a cultic procedure, by which both the relationship with God and the admission to the human community could be restored.

The reasons why this should be so are complex, involving the need for hygiene to be enforced in a gathered community, and an undergirding theological rationale, defined by Joe Sprinkle as the distinction between God as holy, and humans as "contaminated and unfit to approach God".[484] The default position for the individual was ritual cleanness, symbolising a right relationship with God. But the causes of ritual uncleanness, breaking the intended relationship, were so diverse that it was

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[484] Joe M. Sprinkle, 'The Rationale Of The Laws Of Clean And Unclean In The Old Testament', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 43.4 (2000), 637.

unavoidable in ordinary life. Consequently, the complex laws of contamination were accompanied throughout by equally complex processes of ritual cleansing. These were usually associated with sacrificial offerings, particularly those at the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, there was a particular emphasis on the preservation of ritual cleanness within the topography of the temple cult.

A range of physical conditions would render a person unclean. *Saru*, usually translated 'leprosy', refers to a wide range of scaly skin diseases, which would render a person permanently unclean. A urinary infection or diarrhoea made a person unclean for seven days after the end of the discharge, as did menstruation or abnormal bleeding, or genital discharges. Childbirth would render a woman unclean for forty days if she gave birth to a boy, or eighty days if she gave birth to a girl. Even marital sex rendered a person unclean until evening.

It is important for our purposes to note that simply being in the presence of an unclean person was not a problem, and there is no record of uncleanness being passed by breath or mere proximity. But touching an unclean person inevitably made one unclean.

It is clear that at any given time, a great many people in the community were in a state of ritual uncleanness. It would be hard to go about normal life without coming into physical contact with such a person. It was as if uncleanness was itself infectious, with the contamination being transmitted solely by touch, or by the transfer of bodily fluids. For example, contamination could be transmitted by spitting (Leviticus 15:7) or by sex with a menstruating woman (Numbers 19:11). Uncleanness from touch usually lasted until evening, though in some cases, such as touching a human corpse (Numbers 19:11), the impurity lasted for seven days. The constant risk of contamination was a powerful force in constituting the community. It was a constant reminder that they belonged to God, but that that relationship carried moral and practical requirements.

Uncleanness always originated with a human or animal, but inanimate objects could also carry and convey uncleanness. Touching an animal corpse, or the bedding of a menstruating woman, or a contaminated chair, made a person unclean until evening. The reverse was also true, so that an unclean man who touched a clay pot would convey his uncleanness to it (Leviticus 15:12). There was also a secondary transmission, so that anything held in an unclean vessel became unclean, as did anything touched by water from an unclean vessel (11:33–34). Objects that touched a carcass became impure (15:32) though life-giving objects such as springs, cisterns and plant seeds were excluded (15:36–38.) If a person was ritually unclean having touched a dead animal as prescribed by Leviticus 11:28, or a dead or diseased person as prescribed by Leviticus 22:4–7, then any food the unclean person touched would itself become unclean.

The interplay between what is scientific and what is cultural or superstitious is not unknown in modern society. It is a kind of cultural purity lore that means that British people do not usually eat horses, whilst in some other countries they do. The passing on of contamination is also echoed in modern cultures. It can be seen in the playground games of children, who pass on imaginary diseases in games of chase. And it is not unlike the so-called 'theology of taint' by which some Anglican or Roman Catholic Christians believe that a bishop who has previously ordained a woman priest is 'tainted', and will pass on that taint to any male priest they subsequently ordain.[485]

In early Israel, even accidentally or unknowingly touching an unclean object or person transferred contamination. So:

> If a person touches any unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean beast or the carcass of unclean cattle or a carcass of unclean swarming things, though it is hidden from him and he is unclean, then he will be guilty. Or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort his uncleanness may be with which he becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, he will be guilty (Leviticus 5:2–3).

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[485] Ashley Beck, 'Tainted Theology', *The Tablet* (30 January 2015).

Note that uncleanness and guilt are explicitly linked.

That the community was defined by what it might or might not touch is confirmed by the attitude to foreigners. Essentially, it didn't matter what a foreigner touched, as foreigners were already outside the righteous community. So Deuteronomy 14:21 commands:

> Do not eat anything you find already dead. You may give it to the foreigner residing in any of your towns, and they may eat it, or you may sell it to any other foreigner. But you are a people holy to the Lord your God.

The association of ritual purity with holiness, and ritual impurity with guilt, indicates that the individual was held responsible for their own part in the nation's relationship with God. It also confirms the foundational belief in the people's indebtedness to Yahweh. They were to pay attention to these hygiene practices, not simply because they made sense in the climate and culture of the time, but out of a sense of duty and obeisance to their creator God — requirements that could not be expected of foreigners. Even at this foundational stage in the history of Israel, the cult was defined in personal and physical terms.

The complex rules of touch and contamination that marked out the tribe from its polytheistic neighbours were to become a grand metaphor for the relationship between the nation and their God. In around 530 BC Haggai asked

> 'If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?' 'Yes,' the priests replied, 'it becomes defiled.' Then Haggai said, 'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight', declares the Lord. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.' (Haggai 2:13–14)

3.2   Touch for blessing and commissioning

Touch also had a part in the transfer of blessing and authority. Leviticus 16:21 indicates that the responsibility for the sins of the whole community could be transferred to the scapegoat by means of the laying on of hands (*we-sa-mak*).

> He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins — and put them on the goat's head.

More commonly, though, the laying on of hands in connection with release from sin was conducted by the priest at the temple. Hands were commonly laid on animals as part of the ritual of sacrifice. An early such form of sacrifice is recorded in Exodus 29:10–12:

> Bring the bull to the front of the tent of meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it in the Lord's presence at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Take some of the bull's blood and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and pour out the rest of it at the base of the altar,

and later in Leviticus 1:4

> You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.

Ironically, the purification offering (*hatta't*) itself became an agent of contagion.[486] When the carcass of the Day of Atonement was burned, its handler became unclean and had to perform ritual ablutions before returning to the camp (Leviticus 16:27–28), whilst the vessels that had been used in the ceremony had to be scoured or destroyed.

A related phrase is used to describe acts of blessing, such as Jacob's accidental blessing of his duplicitous grandson Ephraim in Genesis 48:14.

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[486] David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity*, SBLDS 101 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 129–146.

> But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn.

The physical touch of Jacob's hands was so consequential that it was irreversible, and had a greater force than his intention.

In Numbers 8:9–11 the people of Israel are instructed to lay hands on the Levites in a collective act of dedication. "You are to bring the Levites before the Lord, and the Israelites are to lay their hands on them." This is a rare instance of corporate use of the action. In the Old Testament it is paralleled only in Leviticus 24:15, where hands are laid on a blasphemer by the community as part of a ceremonial execution. "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him." In the early church, corporate laying-on of hands became far more common (as I will indicate later).

More typically, in Numbers 27:18, Moses is instructed to lay his hands on Joshua in order to transfer his own authority to the younger man. "So the Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him'." The suggestion is that the laying on of hands was effective in the transmission of divine wisdom. It was also a public sign of the passing on of leadership, as in Deuteronomy 34:9:

> Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him […] So the Israelites listened to him and did what the Lord had commanded Moses.

Just as uncleanness was passed on through touch, so was blessing, but in a different way. Exodus 29:37 instructs that

> For seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it; then the altar shall be most holy, and whatever touches the altar shall be holy.

And in Exodus 30:29, whoever touches the vessels is also made holy. But it seems that although secondary contamination was possible, blessing could not be passed indirectly in the same way. A fascinating image in the book of Haggai 2:12–14 illustrates the core principle of touch and defilement in the Old Testament. The prophet, critiquing the injustice of the people of Israel, refers them rhetorically to the ritual offering for sin prescribed in Leviticus 6:27. The ram offered in sacrifice would be considered holy, but the holiness could not be transmitted simply by touching other food. When Haggai asked

> If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?

the priests answered, "No". (Haggai 2:12). Contagion could be passed on by deliberate or accidental touch, but blessing could only be passed on by intentional touch, and then only between an object and a human being. Defilement was far more contagious than blessing.

3.3   Touch for healing

There is no instance in the Old Testament of laying on of hands associated with healing in the narrow sense. There is an incident where Elijah used an extreme form of touch, stretching himself three times on the body of a widow's child (1 Kings 17:21ff), and a similar incident in 2 Kings 4:34 when Elisha lies on top of a boy to heal him: "Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm." There is also an unusual story in 2 Kings 13:21 in which the accidental touch of Elisha's dead bones restores a corpse to life. But on the whole, touch doesn't appear to have been significant in human healing rituals until much later in Israel's history.

3.4   Touching the divine

There are just few occasions in the Old Testament where God acts in a tangible way that brings God into direct physical contact with humans. The first, and perhaps the strangest, occurs in the second creation narrative, when God touches Adam to surgically remove his rib for use in the construction of a partner, Eve (Genesis 2:21). Another such occasion is the commissioning of the prophet in Jeremiah 1:9: "The LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth'." This is clearly describing an intense, visionary experience. We can assume that this is not intended as an incarnation, which would have been a blasphemous notion, but it is somewhat more than a potent metaphor. The same is true of other occasions when an intermediary figure such as an angel touches a prophet. So in Isaiah 6:7, "[the Seraph] touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven'," and in 1 Kings 19:5, "[Elijah] lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, 'Arise, eat.'" There is nothing to suggest that these were seen as other than tangible, physical experiences.

The apocalyptic vision of Daniel includes three references to "one like a human being" who touches the prophet. Daniel 8:18 says "Now while he was talking with me, I sank into a deep sleep with my face to the ground; but he touched me and made me stand upright." Later, in Daniel 10:10, "A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees." Then in Daniel 10:16, "Behold, one who resembled a human being was touching my lips; then I opened my mouth and spoke." All of these references to God's touch fall into a category of vision and apocalyptic, but there is a physicality about them, in each case leading to a tangible, physical response.

Similarly, the numerous Old Testament references to God 'touching' the earth such as Psalm 104:32, "He looks at the earth, and it trembles; He touches the mountains, and they smoke", or Amos 9:5, "The Lord GOD of hosts, The One who touches the land so that it melts", go beyond mere metaphor, and are always accompanied by tangible, physical effects.

Whilst God is frequently described as 'seeing' or 'hearing' the people, the moments at which God is described as touching them are rare, and always associated with particularly significant effects. It would be a mistake to read the accounts of the touch of God through a modern metaphorical lens. The touch of God was received as real and momentous.

Places and objects associated with God's particular presence were defined as holy, meaning that the consequences of a human touching them were severe. For example, in preparation for the theophany at Mount Sinai Moses is told to

> Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. (Exodus 19:12)

Even though God has a voice that human ears can hear, and appears in the form of cloud or fire that human eyes can see, God is not to be touched by human hands. A similar lesson is enforced in the extraordinary story of Uzzah in 1 Chronicles 13:7–10. As the Ark of the Covenant is carried toward Jerusalem, it is guided by Uzzah and Ahio.

> David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals and trumpets. When they came to the threshing-floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, because the oxen stumbled. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God.

As we have noted before, the negative effects of touch were conveyed irrespective of intentionality. For Uzzah to lose his life for simply touching the Ark whilst trying to avert an accident appeared as disproportionate to David as it does to a contemporary reader. It is surely intended as a tale of warning that whilst God might communicate in various tangible forms, God was not to be engaged with through the most intimate medium of touch.

3.5   Summary

In summary, tactile, rather than geographical boundaries circumscribed the extent and limitations of the community of Early Israel. It was significantly constituted by what members of the tribe might or might not touch, and by how they and others were touched by God. This was codified in intense detail and used to distinguish the tribe from its polytheistic neighbours. Sometimes touch was part of a ceremonial action that could take place in public or in private, but it was always laden with meaning. It signified an actual transfer, either of sin or of blessing. Although the meanings of the action were various, in each case something was passed from one who had authority to a recipient. It was sometimes used as a public display of that transfer, though even a private ceremony had a binding quality to it. God's own touch was understood in a very tangible rather that purely metaphorical sense.

Schwienhorst sets the most common uses of *nāga'* in the context of social and spiritual as well as physical boundaries.

> In [all of] these passages nāga' refers to direct contact...between two mutually exclusive realms: life and death, clean and unclean, sacred and profane. Contact must not occur between these two realms. If it does, the result is calamitous (Genesis 3:3; Exodus 19:12b, 13; Numbers 4:15).[487]

The tenor of touch is momentous and prohibitive, but it is not violent. The gentlest of touches from God can make the earth tremble, and the lightest brush against an unclean object can render a person unclean.

> The purpose of the regulations is to limit the consequences of such taboo violations brought about by physical contact. Such calamitous

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[487] Ludger Schwienhorst, 'nāga'' in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. IX, trans. by David E. Green, ed. by George W. Anderson, Henri Cazelles and David Freeman (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 205.

> contact can involve a touch so gentle that the person in question does not even notice it immediately (Leviticus 5:2ff).[488]

In early Israel there is an appropriate fear of touching that which is prohibited, but the fear comes not from force or injury but from awe and reverence.

I suggest that the existence of Israel as community was substantially constituted by touch. I believe this is a significantly new conclusion, in that I have yet to find a comparable point being made elsewhere in the literature.

If this is indeed a new thought, we need to ask why the significance of touch in the formation of Israel has been largely overlooked by commentators. I suggest two reasons. The first is that, as indicated by William F. Allbright in his essay on 'The Old Testament World' in *The Interpreter's Bible*,[489] we have most often examined the society of Early Israel through the lenses of archaeology and philology. In doing so we have may have underestimated the significance of flesh, which leaves no immediate trace on the physical or written record. The second reason is that we have often read the Old Testament through the lens of patriarchy. In doing so we have may have underestimated the modalities of women, who were disproportionately engaged in the management of day to day life with its emphasis on wellness and disease, blood, bodily hygiene, food and the vessels in which it was cooked.

As we will see, there is a substantial discontinuity between the ways that touch was constructed in early Israel, as reported by the writers of the Old Testament, and the very different ways that it came to be understood in the early church. Broadly speaking, there is a turn from touch (and the prohibition of touch) that is used in early Israel to define the perimeters of the community, and touch that becomes a vehicle for inclusion and blessing in the life of Jesus and the early church.

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[488] Schwienhorst, 'nāga'', 205.

[489] William F. Allbright, 'The Old Testament World', *The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 1*, ed. by G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 234.

4   Touch in the New Testament

The conceptual structures of the New Testament can be puzzling for modern readers. Why, for instance, are they so lacking in physical description? Why did the gospel writers not trouble to tell their readers more about the appearance of Jesus? Was he short, or tall? What colour were his eyes and hair? Did he have the rough hands of a carpenter, or the smooth hands of a rabbinical scholar? If the gospels were twenty-first century novels, then all of these questions and more would surely be answered in the first paragraph. The New Testament writers either didn't see such contextual information as relevant, or more likely did not understand the individualistic and sensory categories implied by the questions.

In *The Corinthian Body*, Dale B. Martin offers a series of cautions about our interpretation of New Testament texts on the subject of the body. In particular, reading Paul through a Cartesian lens will produce false interpretations. Graeco-Roman anthropology is not Cartesian. In fact, he says,

> All the Cartesian oppositions – matter versus non-matter, physical versus spiritual, corporeal (or physical) versus psychological, nature versus supernature – are misleading when retrojected into ancient language.[490]

We should not imagine that there was a unified conception of the body in Graeco-Roman philosophy, nor should we assume that what educated philosophers wrote necessarily represents what ordinary people thought. Squire makes a similar point in relation to sculpture,[491] when he says that early Graeco-Roman representations were not intended to be naturalistic but representational, and this should inform the ways that we read the language of the senses in the New Testament.

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[490] Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 15.

[491] Michael Squire, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy.* Ancients and Moderns (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The ontological unity of the individual was simply not as important as it is in twenty-first century Western cultures. Zizioulas says that

> Roman thought, which is fundamentally organizational and social, concerns itself not with ontology, with the being of man, but with his relationship with others.[492]

Martin agrees that the primary meaning of the body was social, rather than physical, so that the theological differences recounted in 1 Corinthians stem from differing ideological and political constructions of the body. The body was structured hierarchically according to categories such as class and gender. The implication is that the meaning of touch needs to be read in the light of social status. A woman's touch was not the same as a man's, and the touch of an officer was not the same as the touch of an outcast. Read through this lens, the most notable thing about the touch of Jesus recorded in the synoptic gospels is how democratic it is.

Ever since the first days of the Christian church, numerous extra-Biblical stories have circulated of Christ's touch having left a mark. These include the hollow of his knees left on a stone in the Garden of Gethsemane, his blood on a flagellation post, and various *acheiropoieta* (images made without hands) such as the imprint of his face on Veronica's handkerchief and of his whole body on the Turin Shroud.[493] And, of course, the image of Christ allegedly appears on innumerable pieces of toast, vegetables and potato crisps. These are accorded status by some people as more than simply imprints, but as points of revelation, where the divine touches the material. For this reason, they can become objects of devotion. Whilst every one of these tales lies far beyond

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[492] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 34.

[493] Such *acheiropoieta* are not unique to Christianity. At Topkapi Palace in Istanbul there is a relic said to be an imprint of the feet of Mohammed on a rock. It is described in the article 'Journey Through the Sacred Relics: Exploring the Prophet Muhammad's Legacy at Topkapi Palace' by Ziaul Haq Akash <https://zeeowl.co.uk/the-prophet-muhammads-legacy-at-topkapi-palace> [Accessed 2 January 2025].

verification, they do tell us something about the mystical significance attached to the touch of Christ.

As we turn now to look at the gospels as a whole, we will see a dual dynamic at play. On the one hand, we will see that Jesus was constantly feeling his way towards crucifixion. On the other hand, we will see that Jesus' touch brought life, and that after the resurrection, his touch was released from embodiment into a supra-natural experience. Again and again, the touch of Jesus creates a sacrament; a place of grace.

4.1 Touch in the synoptic gospels

In the New Testament, as in Early Israel, touch was central to the constitution of the community of faith. But the conception of that community was radically transformed by the presence and teaching of Christ. Consequently, the way that touch delineated the community is strikingly different from that of early Israel. Elizabeth Wendell-Moltmann places physical touch at the centre of Jesus' saving actions.[494] In his ministry, word and healing are indivisibly connected, and salvation extends to and includes the whole person. Of course the body is included in this since the person is indivisible. So in calling for people who were lame to walk, for people who were blind to see, and for people who were deaf to hear, Jesus was making an integrated movement involving physical and emotional, societal as well as individual change. In summary, we might say that the ministry of Jesus appears to have instituted a change in the understanding of touch from transferring contamination to transferring blessing. To put it another way, whilst the regulation of touch was an instrument for the policing of the boundaries of Early Israel, in the Early Christian community it was an instrument for extending the blessings of membership.

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[494] Wendell-Moltmann, *I am my Body*, 60–65.

In the ministry of Jesus, 'laying on of hands' (*epithēsis tōn cheirōn*) is strongly associated with healing. The expression occurs 40 times in the gospels, predominantly in connection with miracles performed by Jesus and the apostles. There are approximately 22 instances in the synoptic gospels of Jesus initiating touch. In at least 17 of those instances the touch is associated with healing. Jesus rarely heals without touching, and the touch itself is construed as a sign of the arrival of the new covenant of the Kingdom of God. In every single recorded case, Jesus' touch is transgressive of religious norms, such as in Luke 5:13 where Jesus reaches out to touch a man suffering from leprosy, and in Luke 13:13 where Jesus lays his hands on a crippled woman to heal her. In his encounter with a man with leprosy in Matthew 8:3, for example, "Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed." In doing so, Jesus subverted the law in four distinct ways. First, by deliberately touching a man who was clearly unclean (*tamē*) he publicly challenged the validity of the law. Second, in doing so he deliberately rendered himself unclean. Third, he used touch to effect and pronounce cleansing from disease, rather than contamination by it. Fourth, in his action Jesus consciously appropriated the role of the temple priests in the sacrificial cult.

In Matthew 9:18, Jairus invited Jesus to lay his hand on his sick daughter. For the synagogue ruler, presumably the action echoed the healing of a sick child by Elijah. In Mark 6:5, Jesus is recorded as almost casually laying his hands on a few sick people to heal them. The account of the bleeding woman (*zabâ*) who touched Jesus in Mark 5:25–34 (also Matthew 9:20, Luke 8:44) is particularly striking, as she seems to receive healing through Jesus, but on her own initiative. According to Leviticus, a menstruant woman transferred impurity by being touched (Lev. 15.19), but there is no implication that she communicates impurity by initiating touch. Only in the later Mishnah (sixth–seventh century) is the touching *zabâ* described explicitly as a transmitter of pollution, and enjoined to live in isolation. Nevertheless, healing seems to have come to this woman from Jesus at her own initiative. Without conscious action from Jesus, her touch itself made a sacramental connection through which healing power flowed like electricity.

There is a unique instance in Luke 22:51 when Jesus touches the ear of the High Priest's servant to heal it, after one of his disciples has injured the man with a sword. This is the single instance of Jesus healing an injury caused by violence. It clearly stands as a symbol of the eschatological reversal of human discord.

At no point in the gospels is Jesus described as having touched a person said to be possessed by demons, even though there was opportunity to do so, for example in incidents recorded in Mark 5:1–20, Matthew 8:28–32, Luke 4:33–37, and Matthew 9:32–33.

Apart from the healing miracles there are only two instances in the synoptic gospels in which Jesus takes the initiative to touch another person. Both occur at moments when disciples are overwhelmed in the face of divine revelation. The first is in Matthew 14:31 where Jesus reaches out to take Peter's hand and prevent him from drowning. The second is at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:7), when Jesus reaches out to Peter, James and John to lift them up and comfort them.

One further instance of touch bears reflection. It is found in Luke 1:29–30, the angel's Annunciation to Mary. "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God.'" April Flakne[495] points out that Mary's initial response to the angel's message is to be agitated (διεταράχθη), which can be rendered as 'sickened' or thrown into physical and mental distress. This, she suggests, may be an account of nausea associated with the first trimester of pregnancy. For Mary, as for other pregnant women, the generation of a foetus creates a physical dysphoria that goes beyond the sense of puzzlement that has been described by (primarily male) theologians across the centuries. In common with many other newly pregnant mothers, Mary wonders what on earth is going on. The word for greeting (ἀσπασμὸς)

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[495] Flakne, 'Nausea as Interoceptive Annunciation', 115.

is a kind of embrace. Mary has been touched within in a deeply confusing manner. This is far more than a greeting from a visitor, however angelic. Instead, Mary

> is summoned simultaneously from within and without to create of and from herself a point of contact with a strange other that promises to give rise to an impossible, natal event.[496]

She finds herself saying words to the effect of 'What's got hold of me?'

Already this is a stronger kind of grip than the instances of God touching humans in the Old Testament, such as God's touch in the commissioning of the prophets Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:9) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:7). God has touched them on the lips, but God has embraced Mary from within.

4.2   Touch in John's gospel

The approach to touch in John's gospel is strikingly different to the Synoptics. Although many healing miracles are recorded, there is just a single instance of Jesus touching the one being healed: the healing of the man born blind, recorded in John 9:6. There, we read that Jesus "spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes" before sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam. It was only after the washing that the man was able to see. There is no mention of cleanliness here, so it would seem that the touching of the man's eyes with mud has a different symbolic significance.

The accounts in John's gospel of the physical touch of Jesus — and the absence of it — are noteworthy, though seldom noted by commentators. We read of only four occasions in the gospel when Jesus touches, or is touched by, another person. Each is unique to John (although the anointing at Bethany bears some similarities to stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke). In addition, there are two occasions, also unique to John, when people try to touch Jesus but are prevented from doing so. This is strikingly dissimilar to the Synoptic gospels, where touch is relatively commonplace, usually associated with miracles of healing, and there are no instances of touch being denied.

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[496] Flakne, 'Nausea as Interoceptive Annunciation', 116.

On all four occasions when John records Jesus touching someone, the touch is mediated through another substance. In the healing of the man blind from birth (John 9:1–6) the medium is mud made from saliva. At the anointing by Mary at Bethany (John 12:1–7), Jesus' feet are bathed in perfume and wiped with the woman's hair. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet (John 13:1–14) he uses water and a towel. When Nicodemus and Joseph take the body of Jesus to the tomb (John 19:40) they anoint it with spices and wrap it in cloths. The usual synoptic words for touch (ἁπτω — *haptō*) or laying on of hands (χειροτονία — cheirotonia) are not used at all. The context is different too. I have yet to come across a commentator who has observed that where most of the instances of touch in the synoptic gospels are associated with healing, all four instances of touch in John are associated with anointing.

On each occasion when John records Jesus touching someone, the event is linked with a statement about the eschatological timeframe. When Jesus heals the man blind from birth is it because "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:4–5). He is anointed by Mary at Bethany (John 12:3) on the eve of his entry into Jerusalem, in a clear signal of his impending death. He washes his disciples' feet at the point where he knows that "his hour had come" (John 13:1). It seems as if, for John, the touch of Jesus is like the pressing of a button that indicates the connection between space and time, movement and moment. On three earlier occasions, in John 7:30, John 8:13, and John 10:39, the writer emphasises that those who wanted to seize (ἐπέβαλεν) Jesus were unable to do so because "his time had not yet come". Each touch, even the one that he doesn't initiate but allows himself to receive from Mary at Bethany, is a declaration of the distinctive mode of sovereignty of Christ at a hinge moment in history.

All four occasions in John when Jesus touches or is touched are in some way transgressive. Raymond Brown points out that Jesus' action in healing the man born blind was contrary to rabbinic law on no less than four counts. When Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany, Judas complains of the waste of precious ointment, suggesting

that donating it to the poor might have accorded better with his understanding of Jesus' teaching. When Jesus washes his disciples' feet, Peter complains that the action transgresses his understanding of the proper order of dignity. Even the action of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial is transgressive, since a Pharisee like Nicodemus or a senior figure in the Sanhedrin like Joseph would have been rendered unclean by any such contact with a corpse.

In the synoptic gospels, touch habitually plays a part in Jesus' manner of healing the sick. It is described in terms that draw on the cultic practices of healing, where touch is associated with being ritually clean or unclean. The frame of reference in John is very different. In the synoptic gospels, touch is both the means for transmission of blessing and also a public sign of the restoration of the individual to the community. John is writing from a self-consciously post-resurrection perspective. His account is not merely biographical but Christological and ecclesiological. For John, every touch is freighted with the significance of the incarnation, and every account of the materiality of Christ's body is associated with the revelation of his divinity.

A number of accounts are worthy of particular focus.

4.2.1   The Healing of a Man Blind from Birth

Several miracles of healing are recorded in John's gospel, but there is only one instance of Jesus touching the subject: the healing of the man blind from birth, recorded in John 9:1–6. We read that Jesus "spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes" before sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Arguably this event ought not to be construed primarily as a healing miracle, since the man's sight is not restored in the presence of Jesus, but later at the pool. The touch of Jesus does not effect the healing. The touching of the man's eyes with mud has a different symbolic significance to the laying on of hands for healing in the synoptic gospels. It makes more sense to construe this event as an anointing like those at Bethany and in the Upper Room, but this time not with ointment or water but with mud made from dust and saliva. Indeed, the word used at verse 6 is ἐπέχρισεν

(epichrisen), meaning 'anointed'. This is the sole occasion in John where Jesus touches an individual in public. The other instances all occur in private with only his disciples present. There is no doubt that John intends us to see in this story a kerygmatic declaration of the contrast between the light of his presence and the darkness of the age to come, the sight of the previously-blind man and the blindness of the Pharisees.

The recovery of sight in this case is not associated with the man's faith, as it often is in synoptic accounts of healing. Here, the man's participation is not discussed. He is simply caught up in a moment. The justification for his healing is as much a mystery to him as it is a challenge to the Pharisees. There is no association of his disability with ritual defilement. In fact, Jesus specifically denies that the man's blindness is associated with sin, either his own or the sin of the wider community. If anything, Jesus appears to parody the Levitical law by using mud, which he has made in specific defiance of Talmudic laws.

4.2.2   Two Stories of the Washing of Feet

Two stories of anointing form framing devices within John's narrative. They are the anointing of Jesus by Mary at Bethany (John 12:1–8), and the occasion recorded only in John 13:1–17 where Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Craig R Koester points out that

> the end of Jesus' public ministry and the beginning of his passion are marked by two symbolic actions set in the context of meals […] These actions, which are similar in form, appear together in the centre of the narrative and direct the readers' reflections on the meaning of Jesus' work and death.[497]

Culturally, people generally washed and anointed their own feet, using a basin and water provided by the host. The only exception would be a very wealthy household,

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[497] Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 127.

where a slave might sometimes perform the task.[498] Under normal circumstances a person's feet would not be touched by anyone else at all. For a host to anoint someone's feet was a most unusual and powerful cultural statement of devotion, even of self-abasement. In a survey of the practice of footwashing in the Old Testament and early Judaism, John C. Thomas concludes that "On extremely rare occasions an individual, without obligation, might take this chore upon him/herself as an act of deep love and sincere honor", and that "Jesus' action is unparalleled in ancient literature, for no other master (superior) condescends to perform this act for a subordinate."[499] It indicated not only that the person doing the washing considered themselves a servant to the other, but that they considered the other person to be of very high status. Kenneth E. Bailey comments that

> The master's acts represent a stunning reversal of roles. I know of no incident in contemporary life or in story out of the past in the Middle East where such an incredible reversal of status appears.[500]

Jesus reframes the anointing in terms of his death, and also of his kingship. Notably, he receives Mary's touch here, even though a few days later, after the resurrection, he goes on tell her not to touch him. We will need to ask what has changed in the interim.

Hultgren sees Jesus' act of washing and touching his disciples' feet as a pre-cursor of their welcome into his Father's house.

> the footwashing by Jesus in John 13. 1-11 can best be interpreted as a symbolic act of eschatological hospitality...In washing the disciples' feet,

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[498] Arland J. Hultgren, 'The Johannine Footwashing (13. 1–11) as Symbol of Eschatological Hospitality', *New Testament Studies* 28, no. 4 (1982), 541.

[499] John C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine community.* PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, (1990).

[500] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London:SPCK, 2008), 373.

he does an act of hospitality, receiving the disciples into the place to which he is going.[501]

Koester also sets the stories in an eschatological context. "Power and death continue to be juxtaposed in the story of foot washing that introduces the passion."[502] John emphasises this by reminding readers that the story took place when "the hour had come for Jesus to depart out of this world to the Father" (John 13:1). Here, he touches Thomas, on this occasion to wash his feet. One week later, Thomas will apparently refrain from his post-resurrection body.

Jesus also tells them to wash one another's feet. There is something reciprocal in the nature of this touch of anointing and washing which is available to the disciples in their human bodies, that will not be available in the same way in their post-resurrection bodies. At this stage, Jesus says, you may give and receive each other's touch. After the resurrection, you may not touch me in this way, though I may touch you.

4.3   Touch after the resurrection

The early resurrection narratives are confusing — they don't seem to have a common ideological determination. They have in common that Jesus is not confined in the past; that the actions of God in the human Jesus don't seem to have ended at death. God continues to be alive in the community. This is more than just the inspiring memory of a person who once was. It is an assertion, to summarise Rowan Williams,

> i) that Jesus is alive and accessible, though in heaven;
>
> ii) that Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit;
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> iii) that Jesus is alive in the corporate life of the church. It is not that Jesus survived death, but that Jesus continues to give shape to the life of the church and the world. The story is not over. The seat of ultimate

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[501] Hultgren, 'The Johannine Footwashing', 542.

[502] Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 130.

authority in the church remains empty. The empty tomb does not signify absence, but presence elsewhere. [503]

In John's gospel, the two individuals who seek to touch Jesus after his resurrection, Mary and Thomas, do not in fact do so. In Luke 24:39, a wider group of disciples are invited to touch Jesus to ascertain he is not a ghost, but once again it is not recorded that they did so. Why is this? What is John saying about what has changed, and what has stayed the same, about the touch of Jesus after rising from the grave? In seeking to understand this, attention has been paid to the nature of Jesus' post-resurrection body.

N. T. Wright describes Christ's post-resurrection form as in some way more substantial, more solid than his earthly body. This is not because he is *less* fully human after death, but *more* so. In *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Wright describes Jesus' post-resurrection state as "trans-physical", suggesting a body that is continuous with his pre-resurrection body, but no longer limited to the constraints of fallenness and decay.[504]

In response, David Bentley Hart has complained that N. T. Wright (and almost everybody else) has a misplaced assumption that Judaism and paganism were largely distinct in late Antiquity. Hart contests Wright's understanding of the resurrected body of Christ as being in some way physical, but released by resurrection from the limitations of human physicality. For Hart, this is altogether too Cartesian, and not nearly messy enough. Instead, he argues that if we are to see the pre- and post-resurrection body of Jesus through the eyes of Paul and his readers, we must resist any notion that the physical body is extended into a new spiritual dimension. If anything, the reverse is true.

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[503] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, chapter 12.

[504] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

> 'Spirit' in Paul's metaphysical lexicon was not a 'bodiless' thing at all, but rather a kind of glorious heavenly substance in its own right, from which the bodies of angels, stars, 'spirits' of every kind, and the glorified body of the resurrection are all naturally constituted.[505]

Hart's reading is that no reality, except perhaps God's own self, would have been understood to be bodiless. The resurrection body is not made of flesh and blood, animated by 'soul', but an altogether new and discontinuous reality, an entirely spiritual body beyond comprehension or dissolution. Hart argues that spiritual beings were still understood to have corporeal existence in space and time, and therefore

> Nothing of which a mortal, corruptible, 'psychical' body is capable would have been thought to lie beyond the powers of an immortal, incorruptible, wholly spiritual being. It was this evanescent life, lived in a frail and perishable animal frame, that was regarded as the poorer, feebler, more ghostly of the two conditions; spiritual existence was something immeasurably mightier, more robust, more joyous, more plentifully alive.[506]

This contrasts with Wright's sense of the resurrected body as a "spiritually-empowered body", a transformed but essentially continuous re-versioning of the physical.

The distinction may be narrower than Hart wishes to admit. When he says that a "spiritual body" is not less, but ever so much more physically substantial than a perishable "psychical body"[507] Hart is in the Wright place.[508] As Brown points out, both Wright and Hart believe in a 'real' physical resurrection.

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[505] David Bentley Hart, 'The Spiritual Was More Substantial Than the Material for the Ancients', *Church Life Journal* (University of Notre Dame, July 26, 2018). <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-spiritual-was-more-substantial-than-the-material-for-the-ancients/> [Accessed 22 November 2022].

[506] Hart, 'The Spiritual Was More Substantial Than the Material' [n.p.].

[507] David Bentley Hart, 'Looking Awry at Resurrection Bodies', *Church Life Journal* (July 04, 2019) <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/looking-awry-at-ressurection-bodies/> [Accessed 22 November 2022].

Hart adamantly argues for a physical resurrection of the body, indeed a body that is localized, that can be touched and can eat. What he disagrees with Wright about is that this body will be composed of reconstructed flesh and blood.[509]

The nature of the resurrection body of Christ, and subsequently of resurrected humans, as understood by the first readers of the New Testament, is of primary relevance to Wright and Hart's soteriology. But it is of specific relevance to the understanding of touch in the gospels, and especially in John. In contrast to the Synoptic writers, John relates two post-resurrection appearances when Jesus was *not* touched, first by Mary outside the tomb, and then by Thomas in an Upper Room. Who or what did they think they might touch? What were they expecting when their human fingers with their human senses approached the resurrected body of Christ? Why did Jesus seem to stop them from doing so? What, if anything, might the tangibility (or intangibility) of the post-resurrection Christ tell us about the significance of touch in a digital culture, where physical senses encounter a non-physical (or supra-physical) entity? Both Mary and Thomas pose phenomenological questions about how well-equipped the human senses are to differentiate what is 'real' from what is not.

Williams, in his 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', describes a process by which "Our human lives are gradually brought into the same 'alignment', so that there is living in us something that death cannot touch."[510] And it seems from the post-resurrection narratives that one of the things that death cannot touch is touch itself.

Mary, meeting the risen Christ outside the tomb, mistakes him for a gardener.

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[508] This is the best joke in the thesis.

[509] Taylor S. Brown, 'The Resurrection of the Body: Spiritual? Physical? Both, Actually.' *Patheos* (August 3, 2018) <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thechristianrevolution/2018/08/the-resurrection-of-the-body-spiritual-physical-both-actually/> [Accessed 22 November 2022].

[510] Williams, 'Elements of a Christological Anthropology', 4.

> Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, '*Rabboni!*' (which means 'Teacher'). Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to (ἅπτου) me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' (John 20:16–17)

Several commentators note that the specific instruction to Mary is that she should not *cling on* to Jesus. In Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the scene *Noli me tangerē*,[511] Christ is very clearly and deliberately seen to be reaching out and touching Mary at the very point at which he enjoins her not to touch him. Shira Brisman sees a powerful theological message here, which is dependent on understanding *haptou* as 'to cling to, or embrace. "Jesus cautions Mary not to welcome him in a secure grasp because this is not his permanent return – he has not yet ascended to his Father."[512] In this way, Christ's extended finger both affirms and denies his divinity. "It verifies his carnal presence and his proximity to man. But at the same time the touch proclaims its transience."[513] Leon Morris says that "there is no reason why Mary should not have touched him",[514] provided she did not "cling on" to him in a psychological sense. This doesn't seem to account for such a strange injunction. Nor does it account for the fact that in other places, e.g., Matthew 28:9, the women who met Jesus at the tomb "clasped his feet and worshipped him" without criticism. The suggestion seems to be that Mary might be able to touch and cling to Jesus *after* he has ascended in a way that she cannot or should not whilst he remains physically close. How can we account for this?

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[511] Albrecht Dürer, *Noli me tangerē*, c.1509, woodcut, 12.7 x 9.7cm, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (1943.3.3663).

[512] Shira Brisman, 'A Touching Compassion: Dürer's Haptic Theology', *Open Arts Journal*, 4 (2015), 9–27.

[513] Brisman, 'A Touching Compassion', 11.

[514] Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John: Volume 4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 702.

One possibility, following N. T. Wright, is that because the post-resurrection Jesus has now "become King" and is fully glorified, it would not be appropriate to touch him, just as the Israelites were not to touch the mountain of God's presence (Exodus 19:12) and poor Uzzah was not to touch the ark of the covenant (2 Samuel 6:6-7). Just as ardent monarchists today may queue to see the Queen lying in state, but may not reach out and touch her coffin, so it is not so much that the resurrected Jesus *could* not be touched, but that he *should* not be touched. It is precisely because they believe his divinity that Mary and Thomas may not and need not touch him.

In the subsequent encounter with Thomas and the other disciples there is a similar ambiguity. In response to the other disciples' claim that they have seen the Lord, Thomas insists that "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). We may take Thomas at his word here, without accepting that he is asking for the right assurance. It turns out that Thomas doesn't need to touch in order to believe.

> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:27–28).

Jesus offers his wounded hands and side as evidence of his tangible presence. The possibility of touch is there, but Thomas' declaration of faith obviates the need for him to do so. As in the case of Mary, we don't know what Thomas would have discovered if he had taken up the offer and touched the hands and side of Jesus, but it is possible that whatever he learnt by touching Jesus' hands and side might not have confirmed his faith but damaged it.

Cornelis Bennema is typical in contending that Thomas "has not understood that Jesus' ongoing presence would be a spiritual rather than a physical presence."[515] But

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[515] Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 165.

N.T. Wright suggests that it is Bennema who has misunderstood. Jesus' on-going presence is as physical as ever following the resurrection, in fact more so. He speaks, walks, eats fish and does "many other things as well" (John 21:25). In this risen but un-ascended state it seems that the disciples are permitted to see and hear him, but not touch him. He is perceptible as to sight and sound, so we can assume that he is at least theoretically perceptible as to touch as well. The injunction against touch is not because he is intangible. And yet some things about his physical presence have changed. He is able to materialise in a locked room (John 20:26) and although he is recognisable, he is not always recognised, for example by Mary, who mistakes him for the gardener (John 20:15) or by the disciples on the road to Emmaus (John 24:16).

We need to see this as a Christological statement from John. The kenosis of Christ includes taking on the limited senses of a mortal human. His incarnate body is pregnant with tangibility, which is subsequently realized in his resurrected body in ways which are beyond the disciples' limited comprehension. John is making the point that Christ's fully human resurrected body may be apprehended by humans, but that apprehension will be restricted by the limitations of their own bodies. Aquinas wrote that the tangibility of Christ's body both before and after the resurrection was a mark of his sinless humanity. Quoting Gregory, he said that "by entering after His Resurrection where the disciples were gathered, the doors being, shut, Our Lord *showed that His body was the same in nature, but of differed in glory*".[516] In the words of R.S. Thomas,

> You could put your hand
> in him without consciousness
> of his wounds.[517]

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[516] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume 16, part 3, article 2, objection 2, 23. [Italics original].

[517] R. S. Thomas, 'Suddenly', in Thomas, *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*, (London: Phoenix, 2000) 426.

This suggests that according to John's understanding, both Mary and Thomas could in principle have touched the risen Christ, but their own limited senses would not have been equipped to understand the sensation of Christ's supra-human 'physical-plus' body. From now on, knowing Christ in his fullness without needing to see or touch him will be the essence of faith, just as he set out in his prologue. "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18).

4.4   Touch in the early church

In his exposition of the body in the New Testament, J.A.T. Robinson writes[518] of the church as continuation of Christ's body, realised in time and space. Paul's doctrine of the church is an extension of his Christology, unifying doctrines of the incarnate, mystical, glorified and Eucharistic body of Christ. For the early Christian church this was an entirely new and radical idea. The use of *sōma*, body, to refer a group of people is unknown before Paul. Paul takes this further by identifying this new construction as the body of Christ. The concept that "your bodies are members of Christ himself" (1 Cor. 6:15) would have been heard as very shocking – even violent – and that is before he suggested the possibility that Christ's body could conceivably have sex with a heathen prostitute. To touch a prostitute, even in a city like Corinth, where sex workers were everywhere, was disgraceful, and would render Jews ritually unclean, and quite probably physically diseased. Seeing a prostitute was unavoidable, but touching one was unthinkable.

Nevertheless, Paul presents the Corinthians with an image of the new Christian community not as corporate, but *corporeal*. They might have understood a notion of the physical body as a natural symbol of the social body, but this was more. He was not merely telling them that they were a new community, but a new unity. The image of the body was not offered to them as a metaphor (as it so often is in twenty-first century church), but as a concrete and singular reality: 'you are Christ in his bodily

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[518] Robinson, *The Body*, 51.

person.' The specific, embodied persons of the local church together constitute the extension of the incarnation.

Paul uses similar imagery elsewhere too. "No one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body" (Ephesians 5:29–30). In Romans 7:2–4 he draws on their understanding of marriage law to describe how the members of the church are joined as if in sexual union with one another. He writes:

> By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man. So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

They are part of the new union that is the body of Christ, just as much or more than a couple having sex are part of one another — and with a similarly generative purpose. They have moved from what Zizioulas calls "the *hypostasis of biological existence*" to "the *hypostasis of ecclesial existence*".[519] This must have a consequence for the way that touch is understood and experienced.

The extended image in I Corinthians 12, climaxing in verse 27 with "now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" is primarily ontological. We don't grow organically into a body — we join it by the baptism in the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13). Robinson describes this as a highly material doctrine. The church really *is* the material body of Christ, and it is this fact alone that leads to the breakdown of social barriers. The body of Christ is manifest in its physicality, and specifically in its activities, such that it is only the body of Christ when it is active in love. The essence of the image is not a matter of government, which comes from God, but of ethics. The unity that Paul describes does not entirely override the cultural

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[519] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 50.

context: the slave is still a slave and the Greek is still a Greek; but they all become something else. They are parts of the body; not individuated parts, such that one is a foot and another a hand, but contributors to the one political agent within the community. The democratisation is not in terms of social, sexual, racial status, but of action.

Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that Paul's understanding of the church, whilst always tangible, is not always consistent.[520] In Romans 6:5 Paul writes that "if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him", suggesting that the resurrection life begins at baptism and is therefore embodied. In contrast, 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 describes the body as a disposable "tent" for use on earth, prior to the arrival of a more permanent "house" that is yet to come, and is therefore not only physical. Yet both tent and house *are* physical, so there is both continuity and transformation in the status of the body. The political implications of this imagery don't translate easily back into the secular world, but if this seems ambiguous, perhaps it is because, from the perspective of the believer, there is ambiguity in the resurrection body of Christ. The body of Christ, and by extension the body of the Christian, exists in liminality, between this world and the world to come.

One further implication of this is that the corporeal body of Christ existed in space and time, but was not limited by it. By definition Paul's letters were directed to people who would read them after they were written, and in a different location, but that did not mean that he was any less part of the physical body of Christ. When in Romans 12:5, for example, he writes that "in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others," he includes himself in the body, even though he is not physically present with them. On the other hand, in the same letter (Romans 1:11) he has written that "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong." Co-presence is not necessary to the body, but it is not immaterial either.

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[520] Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1995), 4.

One of the signifiers of this new embodied unity in the church body was the adoption of the 'holy kiss' (*philema hagion)* in the constitution of the church. L. Edward Phillips indicates that from very ancient times, the kiss served two related functions: communication and the delineation of social boundaries. The kiss, in whatever form it took, was freighted with meaning, and therefore "because of the potential for the communication of both spiritual pollution and spiritual power, the kiss was regulated in Greco-Roman cultures."[521] A kiss of equals, even without any erotic connotations, belonged only between members of the same family. Yet Phillips notes that in four of his letters,[522] Paul enjoined the members of the new Christian community to greet each other in this way. The implied intimacy and physicality was a new and shocking part of the praxis of the post-resurrection community. Following the example of Jesus, the members of the new body of Christ touch each other in ways that would be shocking to both those outside the community, and quite possibly to the pre-resurrection disciples as well.

One of the features of the new Christian community was the absolute disposal of the purity laws of Early Israel. This had been presaged by Jesus on a number of occasions of course, such as his inflammatory endorsement of the disciples picking and eating grain on the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–2) in defiance of the law set out in Deuteronomy 5:15. Still more provocative was Jesus persistently and publicly touching people who were deemed ritually unclean, and whose touch would according to Levitical law make him unclean too. A clear example of this is found at Luke 5:12–16, when a man with a skin disease asked if Jesus was willing to make him 'clean'. Presumably the man was hoping either for some form of healing, or else a pronouncement that would override the purity law condemning him to isolation. Either would have been transformational. In fact, Jesus did both, and did so not just in words but by enacting a new relationship.

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[521] L. Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Grove, 1996), 5.

[522] Romans 16:6, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26.

"Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' And immediately the skin disease left him."

The early church went through a period of intense debate about which Levitical rituals should still apply in the new community, resolving that the purity laws that defined the physical parameters of the community of Early Israel were not needed to define the new Christian community. Paul, writing in Colossians 2:20–22, specifically sets aside the laws relating to touch.

> Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste![523] Do not touch!'? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

To police the boundaries of righteousness in the body of Christ through legislating physical touch would be to misunderstand its eschatological nature. Here again, the paradoxical nature of the post-resurrection body is evident. The end of the purity laws was not a license to treat the body as unimportant, but quite the reverse. "Glorify God in your body," Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:20. Stephen Barton explains that

> The heart of [Paul's] teaching is directed against those who thought that true reality was entirely 'spiritual' and had nothing to do with – required, indeed, an escape from – human embodiment, and therefore what you did with your body was of no consequence.[524]

The New Israel was still to be constituted by touch, but not in simple spatio-temporal terms. When in 2 Corinthians 6:17 Paul refers the Corinthians to Isaiah 52:11,

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[523] Aristotle, 'On Perception' 442b, 80. It is worth remembering that for Aristotle and much other contemporary thought, taste was effectively a form of touch (see note 46).

[524] Stephen C. Barton, *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament and Today* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2001), 80.

> Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the articles of the Lord's house,

he sets the purity rituals of the former temple in the context of Christ's new eschatological reality. The locatedness and eventedness of touch are part of pre-resurrection humanity. The Biblical stories point to an eschatological touch that goes beyond time and place.

5   Summary

In the synoptic gospels, the touch of Jesus generally signifies the passing on of blessing or healing. In this way it subverts the primary meaning of touch in the Old Testament, from the conveyance of contamination to the conveyance of blessing. The significance of touch in John is of a different kind again. The tactility of John's Christ is wholly defined by his Christological framework rather than by mere narrative, and this framework includes a promise of some form of transformed substance "at the right time" both for Christ and for his resurrected followers.

In comparison with the other gospels, John presents us with a less touchy-feely Jesus, or at least, a Jesus whose tangibility is less sensible to ordinary humans. It seems that John is wary of the idea that Christ can be known or appreciated corporeally, whilst understanding that corporeality is the only condition by which fallen humanity can come to know God. During the incarnation "the believer's body is the visible site of divine action"[525] whether through the mark of circumcision in early Israel, or through signs of healing by the incarnate Christ. The post-resurrection Jesus is altogether more ambiguous. Lossky says that "After the resurrection, the very body of Christ mocks spatial limitations."[526] After the resurrection, the nature of Christ's body is to be understood differently, not perhaps as less human, but as more fully human and

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[525] Hugh S Pyper, 'Fleshing out the Text', in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence,* ed. by Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (London: T. and T. Clark, 2003), 52.

[526] Vladimir Lossky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 92.

therefore less accessible to the limited capacity of the disciples. From then on the locus of divine tangibility moves to the Christian community.

We have already established that touch is essentially realised incarnationally, in the context of a particular 'where' and 'when'. It will now be important to think of touch in an eschatological context. The incarnation of Christ transformed the nature of touch, from a vector of contamination to a vector of blessing. The resurrection of Christ transformed the nature of embodiment, and particularly the sense of touch, so that time and place are no longer limiting factors but gateways to a trans-physical reality. The resurrection invites us to move beyond thinking about time and place as x and y coordinates of embodiment. In the post-resurrection context, the time is 'always' and the place is 'everywhere.' This has extensive implications for the Christian understanding of touch.

In this chapter I suggested that embodied human touch has sacramental qualities. In the following chapter, I will explore some of the philosophical and theological implications of mimetic touch that is synthesised by a machine such as a computer. What might be gained or lost if the sensation of touch is created mechanically or digitally, rather than by contact between the skin of two human beings? If it 'feels like' touch does it make any difference whether the sensation has been generated or received by a person or by a machine?

CHAPTER SEVEN

FEELS LIKE TOUCH

Everywhere, we live in a universe strangely similar to the original.[527]

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*

The analogy of human and machine-synthesised touch

In the early part of this work, I looked at the nature of touch as a physiological and cultural phenomenon, a kind of language through which persons reach out to the world and interact with it. I considered the role of touch in the constitution of personhood, in relation to other persons, and to God. I suggested that the touch of a person, and especially the touch of one person by another person, is quasi-sacramental, in that it opens the possibility of grace, the interaction of God. In the last chapter, I looked at this possibility through the lens of the Biblical texts, noting that the nature of that interaction changed fundamentally between the construction of touch in early Israel, and touch in the new covenant instituted by Christ. I suggested that touch has an eschatological significance, in that the post-resurrection body of Christ prefigures a fulfilment of the sacramental potential of touch as a place to meet God.

At the beginning of this project, I suggested that in the twenty-first century we are encountering some significant changes in the ways that we understand and experience touch. Haptic technology is developing the possibility of synthesising touch, and also of digitally mediating human touch across space and time. Building on the insights of

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[527] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 11.

theology and phenomenology, I will now turn to exploring present and future possibilities.

In this chapter I will explore the ways in which the touch of an object, or the sensation of touch that is mediated by a machine such as a computer, is like or unlike the experience of plain human touch. Then in the following chapter, I will set out some of the more significant ways in which the nature of touch might change when it is digitised, mediated or commodified.

The discussion of what it means for a mind to be housed in a body, and how that body relates to a particular subject, has occupied Western thought for four centuries. In the context of Cartesian dualism, in its various forms, the arrival of 'intelligent' machines has provided an easy (if rather lazy) metaphor: the human body is like a computer (hardware) and the mind is the programme (software) that runs on it. This vastly over-simplified image leads to a thousand overblown headlines such as "New start-up aims to transfer people's consciousness into artificial bodies so they can live forever."[528] Sexuality has its own place in this naïf construction of identity. Just as computer hardware is provisional and functional, whilst software is thought of as infinitely malleable and powerful, so the body (sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'wetware') is thought of as an unreliable, functional object in sexual experience, whilst the sexual mind is creative and its potential unlimited. When applied to relationships, this objectification can lead to the ethically problematic position that the body of one person may legitimately be used for the satisfaction of the desires of another. This is a long way from Rowan Williams' concept mutually non-contingent desire calling from one person to another.

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[528] Rob Thubron, 'New startup aims to transfer people's consciousness into artificial bodies so they can live forever', *Techspot* (26 Nov 2015) <http://www.techspot.com/news/62932-new-startup-aims-transfer-people-consciousness-artificial-bodies.html> [Accessed 29 January 2016].

The possibility of liberating sexual fulfilment from the rigours of human relationship to the creative world of the imagination may seem extremely attractive. In practice, however, we may discover that in our most intense experiences we do not feel the detachment between mind and body that is implied here. We find that neither our minds nor our bodies can be satisfactorily sublimated or separated from our personhood, and that this is especially true in the experience of sex and sexual touch. Instead it is in the integrity of mind and body in community that we approach fulfilment. That being so, all attempts to use technologies as a framework on which to construct identity will be less than perfect.

Convergence is a ubiquitous feature of digital culture. The result is a shrinking of culture, so that what looks at first like the flowering of individuality may tend towards homogeneity. So for example, gender construction as an option almost inevitably tends toward gender construction as a market choice. The virtual sex game *Chathouse 3D* promised that its users can "build their experience", offering

> Hot uncensored virtual sex any way you like it. Be who you want to be — female or male. Create multiple personas. Dress up and customize. Choose locations and sex poses — softcore, hardcore and fetish.[529]

Of course, none of this comes free. In practice, it seems that the vast majority of its users choose to construct themselves as heterosexual, able-bodied and conventionally good-looking, albeit with generously proportioned sex organs.[530]

Michel Foucault hints at this when he asks whether we truly shape our sexuality in ways that express our individuality, or whether instead we tend to shape ourselves in

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[529] www.ChatHouse3d.com

[530] This is well illustrated by the short introductory video available on YouTube, 9 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1seUy6n3unU> [Accessed 9 January 2025]

accordance with externally acceptable norms.[531] With projected selves on the internet and social media becoming such a central part of many people's self-conception, this question becomes urgent.

Post-humanism is broadly defined as the notion that the human condition is neither the supreme nor the final state of moral existence. It may be expressed in evolutionary terms, as the next stage of human development, or as a critique of humanism, or as a political stance. It is almost always associated with the quest for the development of conscious machines known as EAISs (Evolving and Adaptive Intelligent Systems), representing the transcendence of imagination over nature and technology over physicality, especially in relation to the human body. It poses the questions 'What's so special about our current stage of evolution?' and 'What's so special about having a body?'

Biologist Julian Huxley coined the word 'transhumanism'[532] in 1957 in an attempt to start a movement that would embrace a post-human future. In his book *New Bottles for New Wine* (named with a self-conscious reference to Matthew 9:17) he wrote:

> The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself — not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but

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[531] Michel Foucault, 'The Cultivation of the Self' in Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality vol.3*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1986), 37–68.

[532] Sergey Merzlyakov provided a useful definition of the two terms in 'Posthumanism vs. Transhumanism: From the "End of Exceptionalism" to "Technological Humanism"', *Herald of the Russian Academy of Science* 92 (Supplement 6), S475–S482 (2022). He wrote that "Posthumanism and transhumanism are often identified. However, modern researchers indicate the fundamental difference between these intellectual schools. The fundamental idea of posthumanism is the rejection of biological, ethical, and ontological anthropocentrism. Transhumanism focuses on changing and improving natural human characteristics through biological, technological, and cognitive modifications. While posthumanism draws attention to the crisis of humanism, transhumanism is the latter's heir."

transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.[533]

At the time Huxley was writing, at the dawn of a nuclear age, and with two world wars in living memory, there must have been an attraction to the idea that humanity as we know it might not be the best that is available, and that we might be able to build, or at least develop into, a superior form. Indeed, since human beings are the first and only species to understand the full scope of evolution, might we not have a moral obligation to direct its future course?

If the human 'machine' as we know it is merely a staging-post in the necessary evolution of conscious machines, then human senses as we understand them (crude, limited, captive to our unreliable, biologically-determined bodies) are also part of an evolutionary process that may lead to complex hybridities of bio-mechanical intelligence, multiplicities of fluid gender patterns, novel forms of embodiment and entirely new modes of reproduction and development. The identity of one personality with a single biological form need not be taken for granted. Naturally, post-humanism poses enormous challenges to Christian ethics. The question, says Richard Cohen, is

> whether computer technology produces a radical transformation of humanity, or whether, in contrast, it is simply a very advanced instrument, tool or means of information and image processing that is itself morally neutral.[534]

Haptic technology, also known as kinaesthetic communication, refers to technology designed to create a tactile equivalent of solidity or transactional touch. It does this

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[533] Julian Huxley, *New Bottles for New Wine* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 17. J. S. Huxley was the brother of the novelist Aldous Huxley, author of the dystopian *Brave New World.* His grandfather T. H. Huxley was a friend of Charles Darwin and an early proponent of evolution. His great-uncle was the poet Matthew Arnold.

[534] Richard A. Cohen, 'Ethics and Cybernetics: Levinasian Reflections,' in *Radicalizing Levinas,* ed. by Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 153.

by employing a combination of motors and sensors to cause sensations in a human user, or by enabling a machine to sense and respond to tactile signals delivered intentionally or otherwise by a human.[535] Haptic devices may incorporate tactile sensors that measure and replicate forces exerted by the user on the interface, such as pressure, position or warmth. Haptic technology is distinguished from earlier forms of control technology not only by the degree of sensitivity (which is essential, for example, in computer-aided or 'robotic' surgery) but also by synthesising the sensation of being touched as well as touching. This can be achieved by applying forces such as vibration or pressure to the skin of a human user, or it can be achieved by synthesising the sensation through transcutaneous stimulation of the nervous system. Haptic technologies can be used to represent and control virtual objects in a computer simulation. At its most basic this might mean reproducing a sensation of vibration in a games console. More significantly, this technology has primary applications in medicine and engineering, and also in military technology, such as flight training and drone warfare. It also has a growing range of consumer applications in gaming and domestic computing. As we have seen, teledildonics offer applications of haptic technology in the digital sex industry. Haptic technology is closely associated with the development of robotics, which in turn is closely intertwined with concepts of utopian posthumanism. If we are to become posthuman, the thinking goes, it will probably be by creating machines that can do everything that humans can do, and more.

Whilst graphic and aural technology have led the way in telerobotics (the control of objects at a distance) and telepresence (the close representation of distant objects), it

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[535] An example would be the *da Vinci Robotic Surgical System* manufactured by Intuitive Surgical in 2000, which is now commonly used to perform minimally invasive surgery such as prostatectomy. The robot has three or four arms mounted with surgical tools and a camera. The tools are manipulated remotely by a human surgeon using manual controls and a video screen mounted on a console, sometimes in an adjacent room to the patient. I had the huge privilege of being operated on by a *da Vinci* robot to remove my cancerous prostate gland. I only wish I had been awake to appreciate it!

has long been recognised that haptic technology is a key factor in making the experience of mimetic or post-human technology truly immersive.

Haptic devices might seem at first to be a trivial development, but they are more than merely tools used in a transaction. Haptic interfaces represent a boundary case in that, by virtue of their responsiveness to external forces, they cross a significant border from being a mere tool (like a vibrator) to being a physical enhancement. Clynes and Kline defined a cyborg in 1960 as "exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously."[536] The user, who surrenders a degree of agency to a biomechatronic device, can be viewed as no longer merely human but to some extent cyborg.

Haptic technology is a largely physicalist discipline, and one of the strands running through its development has been the goal of simulating a sense of 'presence' for the human operator. The mechanical reproduction of touch sensations can be combined with visual effects, and with the manipulation of the senses of kinaesthesia and proprioception to create an effect of being in another place and time.[537] Jyothi and Krishnaiah have defined this as "the situation of sensing sufficient information about the remote task environment and communicating this to the human operator in a way that is sufficient for the operator to feel physically present at the remote site".[538]

We started this thesis with a description of internet connected teledildonic devices that could simulate sexual contact over a distance or across time. The illusion of proximity is a large part of the attraction of these devices. They appear to offer the

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[536] Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, 'Cyborgs and space', in *The Cyborg Handbook,* ed. by Chris Gray, Steven Mentor, and Heidi Figueroa-Sarriera (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30.

[537] An example of this would be the flight simulators used to train pilots.

[538] B. Divya Jyothi and R. V. Krishnaiah, 'Haptic Technology — A Sense of Touch', *International Journal of Science and Research,* 2.9 (2013), 381.

opportunity to be present at a place and time that is distinct from your physical body. Where the goal of 'a sense of presence' is primary, touch is constructed in purely functional terms, so that whatever *feels like* touch to the recipient, *is* touch. By extension, whatever *feels/looks/sounds* like sexual intercourse, *is* sexual intercourse. Who would want to experience the presence of other people in such a constructed and unreal way? Well, apparently, quite a lot of us.[539]

Joseph Weizenbaum, an early pioneer in AI research, built and tested ELIZA,[540] the world's first chatbot, as an experimental psychotherapeutic tool. ELIZA created a conversational interaction somewhat similar to what might take place in the office of a non-directive psychotherapist in an initial psychiatric interview. The machine would direct open-ended questions to a therapeutic subject, based on what that person disclosed. Compared with *ChatGPT*, it was a very rudimentary machine. What took Weizenbaum by surprise was that when left alone with the robot, subjects would share their deepest secrets with it. It did not seem to matter that ELIZA did not truly understand or feel what was said. Rightly or wrongly, the conclusion that Weizenbaum drew was that humans are extremely susceptible to believing they are genuinely understood by machines.[541] This readiness to reach out to machines for relationship can be seen in a recent poll which surveyed attitudes to AI among Americans, showing that 56% of respondents thought that "people will develop emotional relationships with AI", and 35% said they would be open to doing so if they were lonely.[542]

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[539] Gesselman, A. N., Kaufman, E. M., Marcotte, A. S., Reynolds, T. A., & Garcia, J. R. 'Engagement with Emerging Forms of Sextech: Demographic Correlates from a National Sample of Adults in the United States.' *The Journal of Sex Research*, *60*(2), 177–189. Accessed online at <DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2021.2007521>

[540] Note the typical choice of a female name.

[541] Reported in Ari Shulman, 'Why This AI Moment May be the Real Deal', *The New Atlantis* (Summer 2023) <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-this-ai-moment-may-be-the-real-deal> [Accessed 30 January 2024].

[542] Jacob Kastrenakes and James Vincent, 'Hope, fear, and AI', *The Verge* (26 June 2023) <https://www.theverge.com/c/23753704/ ai-chatgpt-data-survey-research> [Accessed 30 January 2024].

This is an example of Jaron Lanier's assertion that humans tend to reduce themselves to accommodate the limitations of technology,[543] or Sherry Turkle's oft-repeated concept of machines that are 'alive enough'[544] to satisfy some human desires. Lanier, a brilliant technologist who was responsible for, among other things, the development of the MP3 system for music transmission, gives a stark warning about the ways that technology acts on us. When presented with a new technology, he says, humans tend to limit themselves to accommodate to it. If all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. And if all you have is a computer, every problem, however complex, looks like a computation. Over the course of time, Lanier says, machines appear to be more and more intelligent, because humans choose to restrict themselves in relation to them. If a computer ever passes the Turing Test, he predicts, it will not be because the computer has become more intelligent, but because the human has become more like a machine.

We are approaching a point where a machine might replicate human touch to the point of being indistinguishable, or even the further point where artificial intelligence might enhance the data so that machine touch became in some ways superior to human touch — more sensitive, more controllable, more economically or militarily effective. How shall we navigate this? What might it mean to say that the touch of a machine is 'like' the touch of a human person? We need to consider the meanings of analogy and their relevance to mechanically synthesised human interaction, especially touch.

1   What do we mean when we use touch as an analogy in the context of machine-human interaction?

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[543] Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[544] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

Manchester's *Cocotoo* restaurant is situated under the railway arches beneath Manchester's Oxford Road station. Perched on a scaffolding tower, high above the diners, the artist Michael Browne spent two years painting a replica of the Sistine Chapel onto the restaurant's curved ceiling. By most accounts his reproduction is a good likeness of the original. It is *not* the original of course, but a copy. Still, it is impressive. It tells the same story as Michelangelo's painting, and it is considerably more accessible to the average Mancunian than the undoubted masterpiece in Rome.

Michelangelo's awe-inspiring fresco of 'The Creation of Adam' in the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City is an instance of a cultural object that may reasonably be described as iconic. The question arises, whether a visitor seeing 'The Creation of Adam' at *Cocotoo* in Manchester has *the same* experience as a visitor seeing 'The Creation of Adam' in the Sistine Chapel. Most people would instinctively answer 'no' — though it is not immediately obvious why. From the distance between floor and ceiling, and to an uneducated eye, they seem virtually identical. Of course, the context is different. The Sistine Chapel is full of shuffling, whispering tourists, whilst *Cocotoo* is full of chattering diners. More than that, the expectations that viewers bring to the experience are different. Visitors to the Sistine Chapel have been told that they are about to see one of the masterpieces of High Renaissance art, whilst visitors to *Cocotoo* are told that there is 10% off the bill with a valid student card.

Perhaps this is nonsense. The two paintings are clearly different, and one is obviously better than the other. Browne's painting is a replica, a mere analogue of Michelangelo's, and nothing more. But what if a visitor with no previous expectations were to be taken blindfolded to visit either the Sistine Chapel or to *Cocotoo*. If they weren't told which was Michelangelo and which was Michael Browne, would they be able to tell the difference? And if they couldn't, would it matter?

Suppose that instead of visiting the Manchester restaurant, a tourist could stay at home and wear an 'augmented reality' headset such as Apple's *Vision Pro*.[545] This headset would generate images of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the finest detail. It could also add sounds recorded on an actual visit to Rome. For good measure we might add the fragrance of incense and sweaty tourists. In terms of sight, sound and smell, the experience of being in the presence of Michelangelo's painting could be reproduced to the highest degree. To say that it is 'almost like being there' would be an understatement. But to say that the individual using the AR headset *has* actually been to the Vatican would not be true. The diner at *Cocotoo* and the AR headset-wearer are in a different category to the tourist who has actually visited the Sistine Chapel. In one sense the distinction is binary: you have either been in the presence of Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' or you haven't. But in another sense, the experiences sit on a spectrum. The person with the AR headset has had a richer and more immersive experience of the painting than the Manchester diner — who in turn has had a closer encounter than a person who has only ever seen 'The Creation of Adam' reproduced on a t-shirt.

In a comparable way, the replication of human touch by mechanical or digital means invites us to make judgements about the meaning of the experience. For example, how should we compare the experience of exchanging sexual touch with a partner in embodied reality, with the same experience of sex mediated through a teledildonic device, where the parties may be separated by space and time. On one level the distinction is binary: you have either touched another embodied individual, or you have not. But in another sense, the experiences sit on a spectrum. Sex with a machine is different from sex with a person, but it is not entirely dissimilar. Many of the same neural pathways may be stimulated. To the extent that any sexual act is a cultural construction, there is a significant overlap.

In his influential 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin sought to examine what happens to a cultural object when it is

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[545] www.apple.com/apple-vision-pro/

reproduced and distributed. Writing in the context of the birth of cinema, Benjamin argued that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be".[546] He referred to this unique cultural context as the 'aura' of the object, a quality that attaches only to the original and is missing in any copy.

A number of Walter Benjamin's observations about the relationship between an original artefact and a mechanical reproduction of it may be relevant to the relationship between embodied touch and its digitally mediated analogue. For example, Benjamin noted that the prevalence of reproductions can perversely increase the desire of individuals to experience the aura of the original. A visit to *Cocotoo* might leave a diner wanting to visit the Sistine Chapel. A synthesized experience of touch might not automatically replace an embodied experience, but might evoke a longing for human touch. And if that human touch is unavailable, the digitally constructed experience might at least have its own value as a good second best. I will never stroke a dinosaur's tail, or see the Buddhas of Bamiyan, or touch the surface of Mona Lisa to feel Leonardo's brush strokes. Their aura is unavailable. But virtual reality might offer an experience that is something like it, or even indistinguishable from what it would be like if it *were* available. Mediated touch is not the same as unmediated touch, but it is not nothing. In fact, the object of reproduction is itself an artefact, and may have its own 'aura' (though Benjamin didn't recognise this). Benjamin's context was the early years of cinema and cheap printing, the mass distribution of still and moving images. As a Jew in pre-war Germany, Walter was deeply aware of the power dynamic involved in the control of information, and the politics of the mass production of culture. He could hardly have imagined the digitally replicated experience of touch, which has its own personal and political power dynamics, related to but different from the unmediated experience.

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[546] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 214.

The functionality of digital machines such as computers developed at an exponential rate during the second half of the twentieth century,[547] and the language used to describe their activities necessarily also evolved very quickly. Given that metaphor plays a key role in the ways that we comprehend and articulate the extremities of our experience of the world, it is understandable that metaphor came to the fore in describing the properties of advanced machines. The preponderance has been for metaphors that relate machine capabilities to human functions. So we frequently hear about computers calculating, learning, remembering, choosing, reading, controlling, assessing and so on. These are all characteristics that a pre-industrial society would have associated only with humans, or possibly with the higher animals. Some of the language of computer control draws directly on forms of human touch. So we 'swipe' or 'pinch' the screen, 'point' to icons, 'drag' and 'drop' them, and hope to avoid a 'crash'. The development of this language was a recognition that computers can perform functions analogous to human activities, and can often do so faster or at a higher level of complexity than individual humans.

This is the language of analogy, but there is a risk that we might begin to regard such attributions as descriptive rather than analogous, or that we might give such analogies a weight that they cannot bear. Raymond Tallis in *Why the Mind is Not a Computer* warns of the tendency to transfer an epithet to a machine, and then forget that the transfer has occurred.

> It is almost impossible to look critically at the idea that machines have memories, that they 'store information' and do calculations, or that different parts of the nervous system 'signal' to one another. We are so accustomed to hearing that radar 'sees' an enemy plane or that it 'hunts' a target that we have ceased to notice how we are conferring

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[547] This is literally true, and is reflected in the principle known as Moore's Law. Moore's Law was named after Gordon Moore, the founder of microchip manufacturer Intel. Moore's Law states that the number of transistors you can fit onto a chip of a given size doubles roughly every two years. Strictly speaking it is an observation rather than a law. It was first proposed by Moore in 1965, and it held good for almost 50 years until the rate of development outran it. See Andrew Graystone, *Too Much Information* (London: Canterbury Press, 2019), 31-32.

intentionality upon systems that are themselves only prosthetic extensions of the conscious human body.[548]

What are we saying when we use terms that were previously reserved for human activities to describe the functions of a machine? Do we mean that a human body can properly be described as a kind of machine, and vice versa? What is the nature of the analogy? What do we mean when we say that a machine is doing something 'like' a human? If it appears to think like a human, respond to stimuli like a human, and make choices like a human, is it in some meaningful way a human?

In my particular study, the interest lies in determining what might be happening if a machine can simulate touch — for example through teledildonic equipment, or through trans-cutaneous nerve stimulation. What happens when some*thing* feels like some*one*?

In approaching this question we need first to examine what we might mean by 'like'. The answer will not be simple and may not be binary. The application of human attributes to a computer makes significant assumptions about both. At one end of the linguistic axis lies the implication that the human brain is comparable to a computer, or even that it *is* a computer. At the other end lies the implication that a computer is like a brain, or that it *is* a brain. The ways in which we understand this analogy will have significant consequences for theological anthropology. To say, for example, that a car is like a horse with wheels and an engine, is a loose analogy whose application has few implications. But the nature of the analogy between human and machine really matters, because it touches on the distinctiveness of the relationship of humans to the universe and also to God.

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[548] Raymond Tallis, *Why the Mind is Not a Computer* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004), 35.

2   Types of analogy

In his essay 'Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy',[549] Andrew Davison sets out the distinctive ways in which comparators are used to describe the nature of the association between different terms or objects. If a word is used univocally, it suggests that the word has the same meaning when applied in two or more different situations. So the word 'vehicle' is used univocally when applied to a car and a bus, even though the scale and purpose of the two objects are distinct. If we were to regard the comparison between a computer and a human brain as univocal, we would be suggesting that they are comparable in simple functional terms, so that the description of a brain as a computer or a computer as a brain needs no further qualification. It would imply that the distinction between (human) animal and (computer) mineral is of no account. In saying that a machine can think, remember, play, intuit or touch, we would be saying that it is doing precisely the same thing that a human does, albeit in a different context.

Alternatively, if a word is used equivocally, it suggests that the word applied to two or more objects or terms has different meanings in each case. So, for example, the bark of a dog and the bark of a tree have nothing in common except for the application of a word that sounds and is spelled the same. The comparison between the two can go no further.

When we say that being touched by a machine is like being touched by another person we need to ask whether we are using the word touch univocally, meaning that there is no substantive difference between them, or whether we are using it equivocally, meaning that the descriptor is the same, but the two experiences are different in kind.

There is an additional difficulty in comparing the qualities of a human and a machine, because the terms under comparison are fairly abstract, and certainly more so than

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[549] Andrew Davison, 'Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy', *Modern Theology,* 37:2 (2021), 254–274.

'vehicle' or 'bark'. When we ascribe human-like qualities to a machine, it is not obvious that we are using the terms equivocally. It would be inadequate to suggest that the use of a word like 'think' to describe both a computer and a human brain is entirely coincidental, and that the word is being used in entirely different ways. The commonalities of process are more intuitively obvious than equivocity would allow. In saying that both entities can 'think', we are saying that they can perform some subsidiary actions that are recognisably similar, such as calculating, recalling and organising information. On the other hand, we need to question whether in using common language to describe the operations of a human and a machine we are speaking univocally. For example, is it accurate to say that a machine can think or touch *in the same way* that a human thinks and touches, or vice versa?

Davison[550] suggests that both univocity and equivocity are inadequate ways of thinking about this, and the notion of analogy provides a richer ground on which to make a comparison. A word is analogous if it is used to compare two objects or activities with a partially shared meaning. The link is more than coincidence, but less than identity. So it would be wrong to say that a car and a horse are both vehicles. But a car may be analogous to a horse in that they have some common functions, such as getting people from A to B, and some common characteristics, such as touching the ground in four places. If we were to say that being touched by a machine is analogous to being touched by a human hand, we would be saying that a machine is unlike a hand, but that some functions and characteristics of the one are recognisable in the other.

3   Medieval accounts of analogy

The debate about the meaning of analogy in relation to humans and machines has distinct resonance with the work of medieval theologians, who wanted to determine in what ways the created order, and human beings in particular, could be described as being 'like' God. Aquinas sought to account for the likeness between created human

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[550] Davison, 'Machine Learning', 257.

beings and the creator God, whilst maintaining that there is nothing that is absolutely common between the two.[551] His understanding was that because there is a similarity between God and humans, some human terms, such as 'loving', 'wise' or 'good', could be extended to describe aspects of God, but that because God is utterly different, those terms will not have exactly the same meaning.

In his early commentary on the 'Sentences of Peter Lombard', Aquinas distinguished between two kinds of analogy.[552] The first kind of analogy describes the relationship between created things that share some features, even if they do not share them to the same degree. This applies to the relationship between human beings and all other created things, since they all share in the quality of existence. The second kind of analogy describes the relationship between two or more things of which one imitates or inheres within the other, even though the two share no common features. He applies this to the relationship between human beings and God, since human beings are in some respects like God, but only by imitation of, or existence within, God. These are essentially analogies of univocity, and they are possible only on the understanding that the essence of a thing is distinct from its existence.

Later, in *De veritate* (On Truth), Aquinas appeared to reject his earlier construction because it required there to be a measurable and therefore finite degree of imitation or likeness between humans and God. He wrote that

> It is impossible to say that something is predicated univocally of a creature and God because in all univocal predication the nature signified by the name is common to those of whom the univocal predication is made.[553]

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[551] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, question 13, article 1, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Timothy McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 215.

[552] Giorgio Pini, 'The Development of Aquinas' Thinking', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas,* ed. by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 491–510.

[553] Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth* (*De veritate*), question 2, article 11,

Any form of univocity seemed to Aquinas to be sacrilegious. Instead he coined a form of analogy based on 'agreement of proportion' (*convenientia proportionalitatis*). It was a form of equivocal analogy based on comparing the proportionality of qualities within the essence of a creature (specifically a human) with the proportionality within God. So, for example, five is to ten as six is to twelve, and music is to time as architecture is to space. Another example is the relationship between a culture and a medium. For an experimental biologist, a culture is a growing mass of bacteria in a glass dish, and a medium is the substance on which it is grown. For a sociologist the words culture and medium have a wholly different meaning, but they are analogous in that the relationship between a culture and a medium in a laboratory is similar to, but different from, the relationship between a culture and a medium in a social scientist's terms of reference. In theological terms, God's goodness is related to God's infinite being in a similar way that the goodness to be found in a human is related to that creature's finite being. A tree, a person and a sonata may all be described as beautiful, because they all have a relationship to a further item — God, who is beauty itself, and the source of all beauty. This conception of likeness found in proportion between descriptors overcomes the problem of human beings being of the same essence as God, but perhaps only at the risk of severing the reality of likeness altogether. If you were to examine a bacterial culture in a biologist's laboratory, there would be no direct connection to the culture of an undiscovered tribe described by an anthropologist.

Let us pause to apply this to the question of the relationship between 'real' and synthesised touch. We might suggest that there is an analogy of univocity between synthesised touch and embodied touch, because one is an imitation of the other, just as the ceiling at *Cocotoo* is an imitation of the Sistine Chapel. But that requires the assumption that human touch (or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) are imitable, that it has qualities that can be synthesised. That in turn requires an assumption that persons

Translated by Robert W. Mulligan, S.J., West Baden College. Accessed online at < https://catholiclibrary.org/library/view?docId=/Medieval-EN/XCT.024.html;chunk.id=00000057> [16 January 2024].

can be qualified, and aspects of personhood isolated and determined — an assumption that belies Rowan Williams' definition of personhood as indivisible. If human touch is nothing but the mechanical stimulation of nerve endings leading to the transfer of chemicals in the brain, producing further nerve activity, then it is potentially replicable. On the other hand, if there are qualities of personhood that are inimitable, or sacramental, then the touch of a person is non-fungible.

In his later works, Aquinas abandoned the attempt to use essential proportionality to account for the relationship between humans and God. Instead he reverted to the notion of a direct relation between humans and God, but grounded in efficient causality.[554] In other words, human beings are related to God, and are like God, precisely because they are caused by God. He asserted that every agent produces something like itself (*omne agens agit sibi simile*). This allowed Aquinas to unify the two accounts of analogy he had formerly proposed: that between creatures (on the basis of shared qualities) and between humans and God (on the basis of imitation). There is no common feature between humans and God, but they are related because human beings are caused by God.

> Whatever we say of God and creatures is said in virtue of the relationship creatures bear to God, as to the source and cause in which all their creaturely perfections pre-exist in a more excellent way.[555]

Concepts that seek to describe and compare human and divine qualities, such as love, wisdom or existence, are appropriate because they flow from the act of creation, the fact that humans owe their existence and character to a creator God. Those characteristics are not merely metaphorical, because they are grounded in causation. But whilst useful, they are never precise or complete, because there is a total

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[554] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume I, question 2, article 3, 25.

[555] Thomas Aquinas, 'Summa Theologiae' vol. 1, question 13, article 5, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Timothy McDermott (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993), 225.

disjuncture between humans and God. To say that humans exist, and so does God, is not inaccurate, but it tells only part of the story. It would be more precise to say that humans have existence (or goodness, or wisdom, etc.) as a characteristic because God exists (or is good, wise, etc.)

4   The analogy of machines and humans

The implication of equivocity is that a machine could develop proportionally from a state of little learning to a state of greater learning, just as a human can develop from a state of little learning to a state of greater learning. In this understanding there is no suggestion that the two processes are themselves alike, since the machine and the human exist in different modes; there is not a flat identity between what a computer can do and what a person can do. A human loves, learns, or touches in a human way, and a computer loves, learns or touches in a computer-ish way. By using these expressions, we introduce a further layer of analogy. We are saying that there is an identifiable way of loving or learning or touching that is characteristic of the way that humans love or learn or touch, and a different way of loving or learning or touching that is characteristic of the way that computers love or learn or touch. These characteristics, which could be defined, demarcate the distinctive 'modes' of what it is to be human or machine. The verbs may be common, but the adverbs will not be.

The question still remains as to whether the analogy of touching between the two entities is one of 'proper' or 'intrinsic' proportionality, or one of 'improper' or 'extrinsic' proportionality. This doesn't move us much further forward. We are left to debate whether the comparison between the computer and the brain is proper, in that a computer's touch is 'just like' a human's, or whether it is improper, in that a computer's touch is different from, but somewhat akin to, a human's. As Aquinas discovered, the application of different modes of existence eventually tends to hollow out the analogy altogether.

This touches on the current state and indeed the goals of haptic technology. On the one hand, there is a mission to create machines that simulate as closely as possible the

experience of human touch — to create a digital 'map' of sensory experience that exactly represents and coincides with the 'real' so that the touch of a hand attached to a living person is indistinguishable from the touch of a machine. But as Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Simulation and Simulacra*, we need not choose for that to be the final goal of The Imitation Game. We are not bound by the limitations of imitation, duplication or even parody.

> Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of a sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian) […] Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as* value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference.[556]

He refers to a representation based on direct reference (whether true or false, accurate or not) as a *simulation*. He refers to a representation that absorbs and manipulates simulation to deliver a new and unrelated reality as a *simulacrum*.

There is no theological or technological reason why haptic technology should not go beyond the real and imitative to the hyperreal, by "a liquidation of all referentials". This moves us to an apophatic space, where it is no longer relevant to measure the degree to which the experience of mechanically generated touch is 'like' — or representative of — the natural experience, but only or at best how it is different. We can choose to create "a hyperreal [simulation] sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of difference."[557] In this frame, "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'."[558] It is a matter of judgement whether we adopt the 'real' and embodied human form as a profound reality, and a standard to which other representations are to be compared, or whether we decide that a simulacrum that has

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[556] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

[557] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

[558] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3.

been generated by human technology and bears only partial relation to any reality could be of equal worth.

A fruitful line of argument is offered by Aquinas' later writing on the role of efficient causality in analogy. The argument here is that human beings are related to God and are like God precisely because they are caused by God. A causal analogy operates in one direction only. It opens the possibility that machines might be like humans but not equivalent to them. If a craftsman (such as Victor Frankenstein) could produce a creature that would love him, the love would be the love that emanated from Frankenstein himself. The distinction between creator and creature would remain intact, even if the two entities had some recognisable similarities. It is unarguable that machines, including computers and their programmes, are artefacts of human creation, albeit through a complex process. We could, by extension, say that the likeness of machines to humans results from efficient causality, i.e., that some machines have the capacity to learn because they are the creatures of humans who have the capacity to learn. If a machine can love, learn, touch, etc., it is because it has those characteristics from its creator. It has a causal likeness. It might follow that not every characteristic of a machine is intentionally imbued by its creator. Whilst the capacity for a machine to learn might be dependent on the capacity of the creator to learn, we would assume that the downsides of human-likeness, such as racism and sexism, might also be transferred, deliberately or unwittingly, to the machine.

Identifying a causal likeness between human beings and machines does not necessarily mean that a machine is like a human being in every way. Not every characteristic of the maker is necessarily reflected in an artefact. For example, not every machine created by a human has the capacity to learn, and whilst there are rare instances of tools that have been made by non-human animals, there is no instance of such a tool itself having the capacity to learn. Within the animal kingdom there are of course many instances of creatures that have the capacity to learn, including flora as well as fauna. The implication of this is that the ability of any creature to learn is both analogous to and causally derived from its relationship to a creator, but that whilst all artefacts derive their characteristics from their creators, not every artefact presents *all*

of the characteristics of its creator. We may be able to identify a relationship of likeness between a computer and a human brain — indeed we cannot avoid doing so — but it would be an oversimplification to speak of equivalence.

If we were to apply Aquinas' notion of causal analogy to the relationship between humans and machines, we would conclude that there is no absolutely common feature between humans and machines, but that they have some common characteristics, which the machines have inherited from their creators. Concepts that seek to describe and compare machine and human qualities, such as learning, choosing or touching, are appropriate because they flow from the act of creation, the fact that machines owe their existence and character to their human creators. Those characteristics are not merely metaphorical, because they are grounded in causation. But whilst useful, they are never precise or complete, because there is no absolute equivalence between humans and machines.

In our context this would suggest that the touch of God and the touch of a human exist in different modalities. The touch of a human being and the touch of a machine likewise exist in different modalities. We understand what it is to touch another person or object because we are human, and because as humans we are creatures of God. We understand what it is to touch or be touched by a machine because machines are artefacts. To understand the touch of a machine we must first understand what it is to be touched by a person. As we saw in the excursus on pregnancy, being touched and held by another person is a universal experience, without which it is not possible to be human. Any experience we have of touching or being touched by a machine comes to us as a 'stretch' analogy of extrinsic attribution. We are aware that it is both like and unlike being touched by another person.

Davidson helpfully accommodates the element of ambiguity by making a practical distinction between 'open' and 'submerged' analogies.[559] An open analogy is one

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[559] Davison, 'Machine Learning', 266.

where we have all the linking pieces of the comparison available to us. A submerged analogy is one where we have to seek out the links. For example, in the terms 'medicine', 'diet' and 'a healthy person' we have the components of an open, extrinsic analogy. If we had only the terms 'medicine' and 'diet' we would have a submerged analogy. We would still need to search imaginatively for the linking item — a healthy or unhealthy person. Likewise, if a painting and its copy are displayed side by side, the one could be considered as an open analogy of the other. If, however, we have either a painting *or* its copy, we might need to 'search' to find a submerged analogy between them. We are invited to consider how touching a thing is similar to touching a person, and how it is different. In doing so we need to bear in mind that human beings make machines, and not vice versa, so the analogy is one way. We may also discover that both human touch and machine touch are separately analogous to a form of touch that is prior to both.

We need to reckon with two further complicating factors. The first is the fact that artefacts such as machines are not created *ex nihilo*, but by the combination of elements that bring with them their own characteristics. The act of making a machine is in effect the intentional repurposing of component parts. The second is that artefacts, and particularly computer code, rarely relate back to a single individual creator. Any computer programme will have been shaped and adapted by many human brains, and the information it processes will have come from many human sources, and from other computers that in turn have drawn on many sources, so that the provenance of the artefact is effectively untraceable. It is the product of the 'hive mind' — the collective rather than the individual human brain.

What does this say about 'The Creation of Adam' in the Sistine Chapel, and its cousin on the ceiling of *Cocotoo*? The two are clearly analogous in a univocal sense. They are different in size and location, but they share characteristics that are openly recognisable. The analogy, in Aquinas' terms, is a causal one, since the mural in Manchester is entirely dependent on the one in Rome. It is a copy of Michelangelo's original, but an imperfect one. No one who visits Manchester would ever think that they had seen 'The Creation of Adam', but they have certainly seen something that is

like it in many respects, and it might well have generated some similar responses. Michelangelo's painting is itself a two-dimensional representation of the theological narratives of creation recorded in the book of Genesis which predate the fresco by two millennia. And those accounts are themselves analogies of the creation of the world, which is inaccessible except to the imagination.

5   Metaphor and the senses

We now need to return to the question of how a machine-synthesised touch is like or unlike the touch of a human. Inevitably, as in all talk about the senses, and indeed all theology, there will be an element of 'unlike' as well as 'like' about it.

The phrase "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck" is of uncertain etymology. It is tempting to think that it is related to the 18th Century French artist and inventor Jacques de Vaucanson, one of the leading creators of automata, whose masterwork was his *Canard Digérateur*, or 'Digesting Duck', a clockwork model of a duck made of four hundred articulated pieces of copper, which appeared to move, quack, eat and even excrete.[560] De Vaucanson's duck was exhibited to great acclaim in the salons of Paris. As an artefact, it was treated with reverence and awe that no real duck would ever have received. It certainly looked a bit like a 'real' duck, in that it was similar in size and shape. But of course, no-one who had seen a real duck would ever have imagined that de Vaucanson's replica was a duck. In important ways it *didn't* look like a duck. It certainly didn't smell like a duck or feel like a duck. What was being celebrated by those who went to see it was not only the object itself, but the skill of its human creator in making something analogous to a duck. That indeed was de Vaucanson's intention. It was to his advantage that his *Canard Digérateur* was both like and unlike a duck. Had he made an object that was so like a first-order duck as to be indistinguishable, and had he deployed it on the pond in a local park instead of displaying it in the salons of Paris, it would ironically have

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[560] The story of de Vaucanson and his digesting duck is told in Gaby Wood, *Living Dolls: A Magical History Of The Quest For Mechanical Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

attracted far less attention and acclaim. In the aphorism "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..." we imagine that it is the verbs that are doing the work. But in fact, the word "like" is where the complexity lies. What is the meaning of the metaphor, and what weight is it carrying?

Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* that

> metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another, or else by analogy.[561]

His starting point was the use of one noun to describe another but, particularly in its application to human senses, metaphor is also used to associate nouns with verbs. So we might say that we have 'seen the light' or 'heard it on the grapevine' or that we 'smell a rat'. In each of those instances, both the noun and the verb are being employed metaphorically — so that a phrase is created that has nothing whatever to do with either smells or rats. Such uses of metaphor drawn from the senses are often a means of grasping for ways to describe indistinct or intangible experiences, if you 'see what I mean.' The use of touch as analogy is particularly ambiguous, perhaps because (as Brenda Major says),

> unlike other forms of nonverbal communication (e.g., eye gaze, proxemics, paralanguage), a separate term does not exist for the sensory process (e.g., vision, hearing) and the communication process (e.g., gaze, speech). Rather, the same term, touch, generally is used to describe the sensory process, specific stimuli, and the communication mechanism.[562]

With all of these caveats in mind, we need to consider what we mean when we use analogies of touch to describe experiences.

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[561] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 21.7, trans. by W. Hamilton Fyfe (London: Heinemann, 1927), 81.

[562] Major, 'Gender Patterns in Touching Behavior', 17.

In a theological context we find ourselves using touch words to describe similarities in not one, but two directions. Looking in one direction, we ask in what ways plain human touch is analogous with touch as it is expressed or experienced in the divine, post-resurrection body. Looking in the opposite direction, we ask in what ways plain human touch is analogous with touch that has been synthesised or mediated by a machine. We may or may not be using two different types of analogy here, so we need to consider them in turn.

6   The analogy of human touch and machine touch

In the development of digital technology, sight and hearing were the first of the human senses to be replicated, largely driven by the demands of entertainment, security and defence. The ability to transmit digitally-synthesised images and sound across the boundaries of space and time is now highly developed. A key focus for technological endeavour today is the digital replication of touch and proprioception. The phrase 'digital handshake' is already commonly used to describe the exchange of credentials between physically remote servers. We now need to consider the implications of a 'virtual handshake', in which a person located in one place and time can use digital simulation to synthetically touch a person located elsewhere in time and space. What does it mean to say "I can feel you", when what I am trying to indicate is that "through the medium of digital transmission I *feel* as if I can feel you?"

Perhaps the first thing to say is that, assuming the object being touched is a person, then the sensation cannot be wholly without meaning. We need to recognise and validate the sensation of digitally mediated touch as being analogous to physically generated touch, but without suggesting that the two are wholly commensurate. Indeed, the person experiencing touch may not know whether they are being touched by another person or by an object, but that will not stop them attaching speculative meaning to the experience.

A machine generated experience of touch does not have the same 'aura' (to use Walter Benjamin's term) as the unmediated touch of another human, but that doesn't mean that it has no moral value or cultural weight at all. 'The Creation of Adam' in Manchester is not the same as 'The Creation of Adam' in Rome, but it is an impressive work in its own terms, and deserves respect. We might even decide that it deserves a degree of respect by virtue of its analogy to the work in Rome. If we believe, after Aquinas, that the commonality of sensations such as touch inheres in the fact of being creatures, then it is within the unique power of persons as sub-creators to choose what is the appropriate moral value and dignity to attach to artefacts and experiences, and that includes experiences of touch. A machine cannot make such a choice about the dignity it affords to its creator. If a human accords excessive dignity to an artefact, they risk making an idol of it. If a human accords too little dignity to an artefact, they risk devaluing the common grace of being a creature. In this sense, the decisions that humans make about the moral value they attach to synthesised sensations such as touch emanate from and reflect back onto the moral value they attach to their own persons.

As Davison implies, touch that is replicated or mediated by a machine is not the same as touch that is effected by a person, but neither is it wholly different. The comparison between machine touch and human touch is more than equivocal. There are things in common between the two: physiological factors such as pressure, heat and sharpness. We are not attaching entirely different meanings to the idea of touch in the two contexts.

On the other hand, the comparison between machine touch and human touch is less than univocal. The touch of a machine means something different to the touch of a human. If I am touched by another person, I may find myself wondering about the meaning and motives associated with the touch. But if I am touched by a machine, I am taken to an altogether more liminal place where meaning and motives lie outside any common schema. Touch by a machine comes in the form of a language that I am not wholly able to understand.

7   The analogy of human touch and divine touch

What are we trying to say if we express an analogy between plain human touch and the 'touch' of God, or vice versa? Aquinas was clear that human beings could in no way be compared to God in essence. There is an analogy of 'proper' or 'intrinsic' proportionality between human and divine touch, because they are personal, and generative, but there is an analogy of 'improper' or 'extrinsic' proportionality between human touch and machine touch, because they are not directly personal. The mediation of machine touch through mechanical or digital transmission, means that it cannot be wholly personal.

Machines and humans do not wholly share the quality of personhood. Nevertheless, they do share the quality of createdness. Human beings are like God because they are caused by (i.e., creatures of) God. Machines, too, are caused by (i.e., creatures of) God, through the agency of persons. Human touch is derived from God, and machine touch is derived from humans. Human touch is a simulation, and machine touch is a simulacrum. For this reason, a machine is not personal, but it may *seem* personal in some respects.

Can the touch between a person and a machine be sacramental, in the sense that it is generative, and creates a dehiscence? Yes, perhaps, in the way that a person handling a stone can experience a moment that is significative. But it falls far short of handling another person. A talented photographer may use a camera to create an image that is beautiful and revelatory, but it is unlikely to be as powerful as the experience of the reality itself.

In Christian thinking our unique value as persons stems from the fact that we are creatures. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the dignity of the

human person is rooted in his or her creation in the image and likeness of God".[563] It is the fact that we are loved by God and hopefully other humans that gives us dignity. But machines are also created and loved by God, and human dignity is not an absolute, such that it is owed completely or not at all. In the context of considering the ethics of xenotransplantation, Robert Song argues for an 'appropriate dignity' that is owed to a creature that shares some, but not all, human characteristics, or even DNA.[564] Presumably appropriate dignity stretches beyond sentient beings to all of creation. And since a computer, a line of code or a digital signal are all created, perhaps there is an implied appropriate dignity — a moral patiency — that is owed to a machine that can replicate aspects of human personality, such as touch. The dignity it is owed may come not so much from the quasi-human function that it performs, but from its existence as a creature in the world.

Deborah Johnson and Keith Miller argue for a prosthetic understanding of technology, in which any machine, including digital machines, is viewed solely as an instrument of human action. "Computer systems are an extension of human activity", they say, and "should be understood in ways that keep them conceptually tethered to human agents".[565] However, this assertion seems increasingly stretched in the context of generative Artificial Intelligence, where complex computer systems can initiate actions that are so far removed from any original human agency, let alone the actions of an individual, as to be functionally independent.[566]

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[563] Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Popular and definitive ed.] (London: Burns and Oates, 2002), para. 1700, 383.

[564] Robert Song, 'Transgenic Animals and Ethics: Recognizing an Appropriate Dignity', in *Animals as Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. by C. Deane-Drummond, D. Clough, and R. Artinian-Kaiser (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2013), 243–258.

[565] Deborah G. Johnson and Keith W. Miller, 'Un-making artificial moral agents', *Ethics and Information Technology,* 10 (2008), 131.

[566] There are important parallel questions to ask about whether life-like machines can have moral agency, but I don't intend to address them here.

Realistically, we find ourselves relating to machines in ways that are 'like' human relationships. A person might say that they *love* their phone, or their laptop, or their sex doll. It seems reasonable to suggest that a "relational robot" that is like a human should be treated with some degree of respect, if only because it is quite like a person. We began with the example of teledildonic devices that replicate human touch through digital transmission. Of course they are created artefacts. Objects that are in some ways representative of a human body such as a photograph, a shop mannequin or even a corpse don't usually attract the respect that we give to a sentient human body, but nor do we usually treat them as morally meaningless, to be thrown in the dustbin without a thought. Instead we assign them a variable level of dignity that we feel to be appropriate.

It is not immediately obvious why this should be so, either from an ethical or legal perspective. The question is explored by Münch, Müller-Salo and Schwarz in 'How to conceive the dignity of the dead'.[567] They posit three lines by which this might be justified. The first is that the dignity of a corpse might be related to the dignity of the formerly living person. This of course would not apply to a mannequin, unless it were directly related to an actual person, like a Madame Tussauds waxwork. The second line of justification is a consequentialist one. If we treat corpses, mannequins and other human images with insufficient respect, we may find ourselves treating our fellow embodied humans equally badly. Both of these justifications they regard as too dependent on metaphysical claims. Their favoured stance is a vague and relativist one. A person should treat a corpse (and by extension any other quasi-human entity such as a mannequin or an image) with respect "if and only if she develops an attitude toward the corpse that is based on adequate normative grounds and that adequately guides her behavior when handling the corpse or interacting with it." This understanding is weak. It fails to provide much helpful guidance, and significantly fails to account for the observable awe with which corpses or other objects with a likeness

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[567] Nikolai Münch, Johannes Müller-Salo, and Clara-Sophie Schwarz, 'How to conceive the dignity of the dead? A dispositional account', *International Journal of Legal Medicine* 138, 177–186

to a living human form are normatively treated outside of extreme contexts such as war or murder.

The theological assertion I wish to make is effectively the reverse of that of Münch, Müller-Salo and Schwarz. It is that however closely a figure comes to representing a human form, be it a corpse or a waxwork or a haptic device, it can never cross the threshold that makes it fully human and therefore deserving of the dignity we owe to a living person. To treat a created object without respect is to deny something of its divine worth, but to treat an inanimate or created object with the same or more dignity as a person is idolatry.

The balance of moral obligation is potentially put to the test in a situation where sensations such as touch can be digitally replicated to such a high degree of verisimilitude that it is not possible to determine whether what one is touching is a first-order human or a synthetic reproduction. We can imagine a haptic version of the Turing test, in which it was possible to create a machine (not necessarily in physical form but perhaps in virtual reality) that was for all practical purposes indistinguishable from a real human being. In such a case, the person will need to decide whether to err on the side of conferring excessive dignity on what might in fact be an insensate object, or failing to confer adequate dignity on what might in fact be a fellow person. Simulation may become entirely detached from anything of the first order, so that a digital version of a thing is created that does not correspond to any pre-existent thing — what Baudrillard refers to as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal".[568] In the uncertainty, it might be right to treat that robot *as if* it were a human, and to offer it the dignity we would want to be offered ourselves. It is probably better to err on the side of giving too much respect to a machine, than to err on the side of giving too little respect to a person.

Let me illustrate this with a thought experiment.

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[568] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

Imagine that you are visiting the Louvre Museum in Paris. You don't have much time to spend, but you want to see Leonardo's famous painting of the Mona Lisa. After queuing for a while you get into the gallery, but you accidentally take a wrong turning, go down a dark corridor and discover something strange that other visitors don't appear to have noticed. Leonardo's Mona Lisa is on display in not one but two identical rooms. Confused, you ask the attendant why there appear to be two paintings when Leonardo only painted one. She agrees to let you into a secret. Dropping her voice to a whisper she explains that a few years ago the museum faced a problem. So many people wanted to see this one painting that there wasn't room for all of them to pass in front of it, even for a few seconds. To solve this problem, the museum's curators used the most advanced digital technology to secretly make a perfect copy, which they now display every day in a room identical to the one that houses the Leonardo original. Twice as many people can now see the Mona Lisa on any one day — or at least think they have seen it.

Naturally, you ask her to tell you which is the artist's original and which is the reproduction. Then she drops a bombshell. The copy is so good that over time, the museum's management has forgotten which is Leonardo's painting and which is the copy. Both the authentic painting and the copy are displayed in identical frames and even experts can't tell them apart. The good news is that the museum can now accommodate all the visitors who want to see the painting. Half of them will see the original and half will see a replica that is functionally indistinguishable. But since no-one will know which they have seen, and no one apart from you knows about the secret copy, the curators are sure that everyone will go away happy.

The duplicate of the painting is amazing, and clearly a high level of human skill has gone into making such an accurate copy. For that alone it is worthy of a level of respect. But the authentic Leonardo painting is always going to be more beautiful and more important than the copy precisely because it was created by the hand of the great painter. It is a unique masterpiece, with a continuing place in human culture and art history. The fact that mere mortals can't tell the difference between the original

and the copy doesn't mean that there isn't a difference. There is. The limit is not on Da Vinci's side, but on ours.

Let me bring this back down to earth.

The touch of a person is always going to have a unique and sacramental quality, precisely because it is the touch of a person, and persons have a unique value and dignity that stems from their creatureliness, realised in the particularities of space and time. If we replicate some aspect of that personhood, such as the ability to stimulate touch sensations, we are effectively taking what already exists and reshaping it through art and craft and science and technology. Artefacts produced in this way are also worthy of respect. They have the fingerprints of God on them, transmitted through the craft of human beings. But the same value does not attach to things that only *seem* to exist. If a holographic representation of a human being "dies" we should grieve, but perhaps not for too long. If, God forbid, the Louvre Museum with its twin Mona Lisas were destroyed by fire, it would be right for us to regret the loss of the original Mona Lisa far more than the loss of the human copy, even if in practice we couldn't tell which was which.

Let me add one final twist to the Mona Lisa story. Supposing the museum caught fire and *one* of the two paintings was rescued, whilst the other one was destroyed. There is no way we could tell whether the surviving object was the masterpiece or the copy. How should we treat it then? The answer is two-fold. First, if we genuinely can't tell whether the surviving picture is authentic or not, we should treat it *as if* it were the original, with all the care and respect that implies. We should give it the benefit of the doubt. The fact that we *may* be looking at a work by Leonardo demands a high level of respect. Second, we should make sure that the story of the copying of the painting, and of the curators forgetting which was which, and of the fire that destroyed one of the artefacts, never gets forgotten. We must continue to tell this story so that people coming to the object afresh are not deceived into believing it is certainly the real thing, when in fact we only know that it might be.

Now suppose that the object being replicated is not the Mona Lisa, but the touch, perhaps the intimate sexual touch, of another human being. Sacraments, we have said, become such as they are construed as such by the agents. The primary implication is that the sacramental significance of plain touch, by which I have said it may be properly distinguished from touch that is synthesised or mediated, is ultimately dependent on the significance that the persons place upon it.

8   Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered in what ways touch that is machine-generated or simulated may be like or unlike plain human touch. It is clear that the two are analogous but not at all clear that they are fungible. One can easily imagine a situation in which a haptic device could simulate human touch in a way that would cause a person to say "that feels just like being touched by a person". It is not the same thing, because, as Robert Spaemann says,

> a computer has no consciousness, does no thinking, makes no efforts for anything and knows nothing, because there is nothing 'it is like' to be a computer. And for this reason the difference between the inside and the outside has no reality for a computer.[569]

In practice, the differentiation between the human and the mechanical depends on recognition, and as technology develops it may be increasingly difficult to discern and decide what we should recognise as personal touch, and what status we should extend to it. The matter of discernment means that there is a possibility of losing, or at least changing, the cultural value of touch. The next chapter looks at three ways that might happen.

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[569] Robert Spaemann, *Persons*, trans. by Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LOSING TOUCH?

> The central event of the twentieth century is the overthrow of matter.[570]
>
> Alvin Toffler, *Cyberspace and the American Dream*

Touch in digital culture

The work of Rowan Williams, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others convinces me that the body is the inescapable constituent of personhood. It is the place where we humans touch the world, and where we give and receive information in the form of sight, sound, touch, taste, smell and other senses. All of the tools we humans have for interpreting information are locked into these biological units. Such power as we exercise through our bodies, we exercise primarily through touch.

Every human body is unique. It is not replicable, but when put together with another unique body it can have an astonishing generative ability, with a potential to do great good or profound harm. With our bodies we make choices, and with our bodies we affect the world. Bodies can work together on a shared project, and yet remain individual. A human body, including a human brain, is immensely powerful. It is highly fallible, and yet it has extraordinary powers of self-healing. And it is finally mortal.

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[570] Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler, 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', in *Future Insight,* 1.2 (August 1994) <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/futureinsights/fi1.2magnacarta.html> [accessed 30 September 2022].

In this chapter I will explore three key ways in which digital culture potentially changes the nature of touch in society. They are the diminution of the richness of contextual information, the loss of authenticity, and the interpolation of the market.

Machines are distinctly different from bodies. If you join two machines together, you have essentially made one bigger machine, but you cannot physically combine two or more human bodies to make one bigger one. You may synthesise a body in an avatar or even a convincing doll, but what you will have made is a metaphor for the original. Human bodies are firmly rooted in space and time. That is both the wonder of them, and also their tragedy.

Mark Poster suggests that the relationship between humans and machines is not stable, but has taken a turn with the development of digitally connected machines.

> The Internet resists the basic conditions for asking the question of the effects of technology. It installs a new regime of relations between humans and matter, and between matter and non-matter, reconfiguring the relation of technology to culture, and thereby undermining the standpoint from within which, in the past, a discourse developed - one which appeared to be natural - about the effects of technology.[571]

The cultural discourse around touch is consequently changing. In this chapter I will explore some of the changes that digital culture has posed to the plain understanding of touch.

1   Digital representation and the collapse of context

Once — and only once — I visited Walt Disney World. The park is a vast confection of concrete, steel and plastic that was built on cattle pasture and reclaimed swamp

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[571] Mark Poster, 'Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere', in *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace,* ed. by David Holmes (London: Sage, 1997), 215–216.

outside Orlando, Florida, and opened in 1971. It describes itself as "the happiest place on earth".[572] It was every bit as awful as I had imagined!

As I walked with my young family through the gaudy attractions, we ran into a small crowd that had stopped in the middle of a road by the edge of a lake. The crowd was watching in awe as a real live mother duck, followed by a parade of ducklings, waddled across the road and slipped into the water. Many of the crowd had already bumped into humans dressed up as Donald Duck and his three mischievous nephews, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, but this was different. It was a quasi-sacramental moment, as a large group of tourists found themselves momentarily caught in wonder at the sight of something that was independently alive, perhaps the only thing they would see that day that had not been planned, constructed or directed by Disney World employees. I wondered whether we might not have been even more impressed had we been able to see the rich biodiversity of the land we were standing on, as it had been before the developers had arrived.

Of course, the other thing that was on display that day, that was even more wondrous than the family of ducks, was the visitors themselves, each one alive and unique and extraordinary, and together forming a complex temporary community of duck fanciers. But we were hardly in a position to appreciate that. We humans visiting the park were sufficiently decontextualised that we treated each other as little more than rivals for the best spots at the front of the queue. When you enter 'The Magic Kingdom', all of the normal reference points of reality in space and time are consciously suspended. At Disney World, the hyperreal trumps the real. It is a place where you pay extravagantly to lose touch with reality, and reconnect with fantasy.

Digital culture is akin to a magic kingdom in which we are invited to suspend the distinction between what is real and what is hyperreal. This happens, as it does in

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[572] The slogan, "The Happiest Place on Earth" is trademarked by the Disney Corporation. The registration for the trademark was filed in 1998. See <https://trademarks.justia.com/755/43/the-happiest-place-on-earth-75543365.html> [Accessed 9 January 2025].

Disney World, through an almost imperceptible process of decontextualisation, the stripping out of context from the information we send, receive and use.

This 'collapse of context'[573] is one of the core features of digital transmission. For example, information held in a physical object like a book will change over time. The text will stay the same of course, but the object itself will accrue additional contextual information; a musty smell, yellowed pages or a cracked spine. In contrast, digital information is frictionless. It will be unaltered by time passing or distance travelled. A line of computer code can 'travel' across great distances and arrive in exactly the same condition in which it was sent. It can sit on a storage device for months or years, and when recalled it will appear exactly the same. If I send an email to a friend in Australia it will take no longer to arrive than the email to a colleague on the next desk, and the contents will be entirely unaffected by the journey.

This 'death of distance' contributes to what David Weinberger describes as "the rise of the miscellaneous" and Ted Nelson calls "the deep intertwingling of digital information".[574] When context is lost, much of the depth and nuance of communication goes with it. All digital interaction has a tendency to strip out context, but it does so whilst promising more, rather than less information. In this chapter I will reflect on what impact that has on our self-understanding, particularly as it relates to simulations of touch. In his book *Lost Icons*, Rowan Williams asks "what happens to our sense of the human when it is divorced from a grasp of the self as something realized in *time*?" [575]

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[573] The term "collapse of context" grew out of the work of social psychologists Erving Goffman and Joshua Meyrowitz. In his book *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz first applied the concept to media like television and the radio; Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[574] David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder* (New York: Times Books, 2007), 125.

[575] Williams, *Lost Icons,* 6.

Information that is miscellanized allows for multiple and randomized connections, and a far richer possibility of inter-relationship, but it also challenges theological notions of the ordering of the universe, and the notion of personhood, in at least two distinct ways.

The first is that in the digital context the distinction between a thing and its label is less apparent. Both exist only as a string of (usually) binary signals. This has profound implications for the ownership of information, including the information that we have previously categorized as 'private'. To give an analogue example, when Person A sends a handwritten letter to Person B, the physical object becomes the property of Person B, whilst the 'ownership' and copyright of the words written by the sender remain with Person A. When information is sent in a digital form, such as an email, the law is much less clear. Detaching the means of sending a message from an object in space and time, and rendering it in digital form, means that ownership of the information is harder to determine.[576] This rarely matters in the case of a letter, but might be important in the case of a digital representation of a sexual encounter, or other form of touch.

David Weinberger argues that we must "get rid of the idea that there's a best way of organizing the world".[577] But if this includes breaking down the distinction between the creator of a cultural artefact (such as a blog, a song, an image or a touch) and the

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[576] The case of Fairstar Heavy Transport v Adkins and another [2012] EWHC 2952 (TCC) called into question whether or not a company had an "enforceable proprietary claim to the content of the e-mails" held by an employee when they were sent or received by the employee from a personal email account. The court found that information in itself could not be regarded as property. The judgement is available online at < https://www.bakerandpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Fairstar-Heavy-Transport-NV-v-Adkins-and-others-2013-2-CLC-272.pdf> [Accessed 9 January 2025]. The case of Capita Plc v Darch [2017] EWHC 1248 (Ch) reached a similar conclusion. See < https://vlex.co.uk/vid/capita-plc-and-another-839920879> [Accessed 9 January 2025].

[577] Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, 10.

thing itself, we risk losing the crucial distinction between subject and object. It becomes much easier to objectify a human being when they are digitally represented than it is in their physical presence. Perhaps you could artificially replicate my brain and store it for the benefit of future generations. Perhaps you could even synthesise my body in digital form, so that if you were wearing your Virtual Reality glasses and your haptic gloves I would look and feel almost completely real to you. But would that digital representation of me be a subject or an object? Who would that artificial person really be? And who would they belong to?

A further challenge lies in the flattening of relationships in the digital context. Where artefacts are represented in code rather than in physical reality, no one object has more cultural heft than another. A line of code representing the DNA of a human being is superficially indistinguishable from that of a fruit fly, or for that matter, from the line of code representing the graphical representation of that human being.

When we consciously touch or are touched by another person, we are not only receiving a physical sensation in the form of electronic signals to the brain. We are doing something far richer and more complex. We are hearing and interpreting the language they are using, picking up physical sensations, decoding and interpreting them on the basis or our learned experience. Then, another part of our brain does a further decoding job and interprets those signals, assigning them a series of meanings, then stringing the meanings together to make a kind of sense. At the same time, we are seeking to understand them within our much wider context of history and geography. Who is this person that is touching me? Where are they? What has brought us to this point? What other experiences do we bring to this meeting? This is Merleau-Ponty's sub-reflective body schema, which brings together our pre-reflective or proprioceptive awareness of posture and sensation in an integrated whole, and also allows us to imagine what is going on in the perceptions of the other. All of this information adds layers of meaning to the encounter between two people.

If the engagement is digitally mediated, almost all of that essential context is stripped out. Developing the 'language' with which we interpret facial expressions and touch is

complex, and misunderstandings are common enough. It is even easier to misunderstand the decontextualised meaning of an email or text message. Even determining whether you are interacting directly with a person, or with a bot, may be unclear.

Digital space and time are different from physical (Cartesian) space and time in a number of significant ways. One is *proximity*. In physical space and time, some things are nearer than others. It seems obvious to say that physical touch depends on absolute proximity. Part of the weighty significance of physical touch is that it is only available when I am sharing space and time with the person I am touching. Indeed, much of the significance comes from its *un*availability when persons are not together. Nothing makes a person appreciate the touch of a lover more than their absence.

In digital space and time every artefact is equally close (or equally distant). The proximity in space and time of a digital artefact or an artificial person carries no intrinsic heft or significance. When I meet a person dressed up as Donald Duck, have I in any real sense been close to Donald Duck? A child might say 'yes', whilst an adult might think of the costumed character as an analogue of the fictional entity. I am at least clear that I have not been close to a real duck, since the character bears only a weak analogy to an *Anas platyrhynchos*. Ironically, I *have* been close to a real person, but any opportunity to meet or understand that person has been deliberately obscured by the costume. In this case, the representation almost completely devalues the meeting of persons. Might that not be true of a sexual encounter mediated by a teledildonic device?

Another distinct difference between digital and physical information is *positional uniqueness*. Physical objects can only be in one place at a single moment. In digital space and time, an artefact need not be restricted to a single location or time. Physical objects depend on order, but digital representations thrive on searchability. In a physical library, for instance, each book belongs in a particular place on the shelf, and the catalogue tells you how to find it. A book on the history of cookery has to be shelved under cookery or history. A digital version of the same book could be

catalogued online under cookery *and* history — and duck in orange sauce and anything else, according to how it is tagged.

A third distinction between digital space and Cartesian space is *distributed coordinates*. Physical space is shared, so that every artefact has distinct coordinates in relation to every other artefact, and in relation to the whole. As a result, they have neighbours — other objects that belong with them in space and time. In a digital context the relative positioning of an object is meaningless. The centre of every coordinate system is the viewpoint of the subject. So, for example, in digital space, the subject of an action is at the centre of every map. Whenever a map opens, it opens around the subject. In a digital environment, wherever you are, you are at the centre of the world. Stripped of much of its context, a synthesised experience of touch can only be centred on the one who experiences it. The potential for gift or precarity in the encounter is lessened.

This collapse of context has a number of consequences. One is *replicability*. I am perfectly well aware that at the same time that I 'meet' Donald Duck at Disney World in Florida, other tourists are meeting other Donald Ducks at other Disney resorts around the world. Likewise, a digital artefact can be replicated any number of times without any loss of information. Consequently, it has no permanent claim to uniqueness. It is this replicability that calls into question the value of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) assigned to digital art works. There is nothing either legal or practical to prevent such an artwork being duplicated, or to prevent multiple NFTs being assigned to the same work. Perversely, this replicability keeps the digital artefact from having traction in the world of things, since as Jaron Lanier points out, "what makes something real is that it is impossible to represent it to completion."[578] This also applies to simulacra of human senses. An instance of touch can only exist in a distinct place and time, but a digital representation of that sensation could be copied, distributed, transmitted or stored, theoretically infinitely. Would it be right to suggest

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[578] Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*, 133.

that the duplication of sensation devalues it, or simply that it makes it available in a new way?

Another consequence of the collapse of context is *relative value*. In digital culture, levels of order are conflated. There is no difference in significance between a thing and its label: between stuff and data. Artefacts are made of the same stuff as their metadata, and in turn are indistinguishable from digitised records of those artefacts. Since un-interpreted digital artefacts consist of the same stuff, and that stuff has no physical presence, they have no relative value. No object or action can claim to have any greater cultural heft than any other. The painful implication is that there is no distinction in value between the digital representation of a stroke or a slap. In a digital context there is no distinction between an object and its metadata. They are both simply lines of code. It can only really be understood in practice, because in Graham Ward's words, "cyberspace is a praxis".[579] Baudrillard writes that

> Order always opts for the real. When in doubt, it always prefers this hypothesis […] But this becomes more and more difficult, because if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true (and this reversibility itself is part of the apparatus of simulation and the impotence of power): namely, it is *now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real.[580]

In summary, digital transmission has distinct advantages in terms of volume, speed, cost and so on; but there are significant losses too. Noreen Herzfeld writes that

> We cannot fully listen, hear and be heard, understand and empathize, and give aid unless we are physically present to one another. It is not that we cannot do those things from a distance, it is rather that we cannot do them in their fulness.[581]

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[579] Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2008), 249.

[580] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 21.

[581] Noreen Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 28.

Nancy Baym is anxious that we avoid a naive assumption that digital mediation necessarily impoverishes human communication. There are many schematic factors that can mitigate this, including expectations and motivations, familiarity with the technology, whether the persons know each other already in embodied life. Nevertheless, she insists, "nothing can replace a warm hug".[582] Human touch that is mediated through a physical or digital channel is not meaningless or worthless, but it cannot be as richly freighted with meaning as a fully embodied encounter.

2   Simulation and authenticity

A key area in which the development of haptic technology evidences a cultural shift is the tension between simulation and authenticity — between what is 'real' and what is synthetic.

By definition, digitally mediated communication passes from the physical to the synthetic and back to the physical. A mobile phone, for example, works by translating sound waves from the voice of the caller into 'packets' of digital information, then transmitting those packets to a receiver, which decodes them and translates them back into sound waves, which are then relayed from a speaker to the ear of the recipient. During the process of transmission, the information has only potential, not actual meaning. It is entirely lacking in moral or cultural heft. The same is true, for example, of the transmission of information inherent in the use of teledildonic equipment.[583]

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[582] Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 57.

[583] My intention at this stage is not to measure these tensions against conventional notions of sexual ethics, but to consider some of the cultural meanings that might be represented by the new technologies, and the broad areas of political and ethical challenge that arise.

The fact that touch is digitally mediated doesn't necessarily mean that the meanings attached to it by the producer or recipient are not genuine. For example, digitally mediated video content can evoke very real responses, such as laughter, disgust or compassion. If these responses to video texts are genuine, why should our response be any less genuine if the sense of touch is added to the mix? It is possible to develop very 'real' relationships between humans who meet digitally. Representation can grow more real for us as we become more familiar with it, and more sophisticated in decoding it. But part of that sophistication may involve coming to terms with greater uncertainty. The collapse of context, the detachment from space and time that is inherent in digital communication, takes the subjects to an 'uncanny' area where the possibility of manipulation makes it impossible to be certain whether what you are interacting with is 'real' or constructed. The interpolation of a phase of meaningless transmission in human sexual contact must be significant. It opens the possibility of deception, or of a separation of the imaginative work of the mind from the physical expression of the body. Teledildonic devices, for example, offer the possibilities of unboundaried gender-fluidity, anonymity, and multiple personae.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in contemporary culture many people are prepared to surrender some apparently fundamental aspects of encounter for other goods such as hygiene, aesthetic convenience, reliability or guaranteed happy endings. A television cooking show may be extremely popular, even though it cannot provide what might seem like the foundational sensations of tasting and smelling the food. It provides *some* of the joy of cooking, and you don't have to do the washing-up.

Similar compromises might be available in relation to the sense of touch. At a round table on robotics,[584] a number of younger delegates were discussing the pros and cons of engaging with a non-human, AI-driven sex partner. Several found the idea distasteful, and most said that in normal circumstances they would prefer to have sex

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[584] Informal conversations at the *Virtual Futures Salon*, held on 17 October 2018 at Library, Soho, London.

with a fully human partner. On the other hand, they agreed that they could see many up-sides to such a proposition. A sex robot could be programmed to understand your sexual preferences, possibly better than any human partner. It would not make any reciprocal demands of its own. It would take much of the risk out of sexual encounter. It would never give you a sexual infection and could not make you pregnant. Best of all, it would be always available, turned on at the flick of a switch, and without the need for complex negotiation.

Writing about the state of teledildonics in 2011, journalist Darren Quick enthused that

> The remote control can also be used locally if your lover is more adept at handling a TV remote than the female form. And if you're lacking a special someone, you can let the vibrator get its inspiration through your choice of music or choose from a list of anonymous users logged onto the system who will be only too happy to provide the necessary input.[585]

The assumption is that technology can only extend choice, and that all individual choice necessarily means improvement. An alternative view is that teledildonic apparatus has the effect of narrowing choice, for example by instrumentalising touch around the sex organs, and focussing the sexual encounter on the individual orgasm, negating the social dimensions of sex, its unitive, generative and healing functions.

In *Sex These Days*, well before the commercial availability of teledildonics, Linda Woodhead wrote presciently that

> If sex can only be understood as the individual's free quest for intense pleasure this seems […] to turn all sexual behaviour into a form of masturbation. It becomes impossible to understand sexual activity in terms of anything which transcends the individual — whether that be a relationship or an institution. Sex's sole *telos* becomes the pleasure of the free individual; even when sexual pleasure is brought about by the

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[585] Darren Quick, 'Taking remote-sex to the next level (NSFW)', *New Atlas* (21 April 2011) <http://newatlas.com/remote-pleasure-teledildonics/18459> [Accessed 20th January 2017].

agency of the other rather than the self, it ceases to have any meaning beyond the pleasure it brings to the self.[586]

Of course this is a far cry from Rowan Williams' vision of desire calling to desire in a costly and risky way, and love actualising the personhood of the partners. It is a fully reductionist view of touch as a stimulant for the individual. Nevertheless, it has its attractions, and for those who lack a richer vision of the meaning of intimacy, or for whom that intimacy is not available, it may seem like a good second best. Sherry Turkle frequently explores the notion that artificial devices may be 'alive enough' to satisfy most people's relational expectations. She is a psychologist, not a theologian, but her anxieties about the easy trade-off between simulation and authenticity are ontological.

> After several generations of living in the computer culture, simulation will become fully naturalized. Authenticity in the traditional sense loses its value, a vestige of another time.[587]

And this is by no means inconsequential.

> If our experience with relational artefacts is based on a fundamentally deceitful interchange, can it be good for us? Or might it be good for us in the 'feel good' sense, but bad for us in our lives as moral beings?[588]

Turkle wants to know what these developments are doing to our sense of ourselves, our relationships, our bodies. One part of the answer is that when culturally weightless information is transferred, it is likely that the distinctions between fantasy and reality will become blurred. How much this matters is a matter of judgement. Nancy Baym suggests that:

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[586] Linda Woodhead, 'Sex in a Wider Context', in *Sex These Days*, ed. by J. Davies and G. Loughlin (Sheffield Academic: Sheffield: 1997), 101.

[587] Sherry Turkle, 'Simulation vs Authenticity', in *What is Your Dangerous Idea*, ed. by John Brockman (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

[588] Turkle, Simulation vs Authenticity, 20.

> At the core of the matter is the fact that contexts that transcend space and offer few social cues provide people with considerably more latitude and control in shaping the ways they present themselves to others.[589]

Authenticity, by which I mean the congruence between the tangible and the intangible, has a high value in Christian ethics.[590] In common usage we assume that every human body is in possession of a single self, and a body that presents multiple or competing personas is pathological. The sacredness and singularity of the natural embodied person, and the integrity of personality as a goal in human wellness, are historically fundamental to a faith that is founded on the concept of incarnation.

3   The marketisation/commoditisation of sexual touch

The Internet is a vast collection of inter-linked computers spanning the world. It depends on huge Internet Service Providers in several countries, owned by corporations such as IBM, UUNET and AT&T. They are in turn connected at IXPs (Internet Exchange Points) run by corporations. Smaller companies that offer Internet access to domestic and business customers tap into these larger providers via millions of miles of cables crossing continents and oceans. The internet depends on millions of users freely contributing information, time, and processing power to create a virtually global network. If you put a stamp on a letter and post it in a post-box you don't automatically become part of the Royal Mail. You are just using a service that someone else provides. The Internet is different. If you connect your home computer or phone to the network, you become a part of it. At one level, digital culture may be seen as highly democratic, even egalitarian. The World Wide Web, like the moon, belongs to everyone, but just as that hasn't stopped countries racing to plant their

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[589] Baym, *Personal Connections*, 121.

[590] ... and not only in Christian ethics. This is what Walter Benjamin was reaching for in his concept of 'aura' in *The Work of Art* (see note 20).

flags on the lunar landscape, so there is fierce competition to colonise the virtual environment and exploit it for power or for profit.

Historically, ownership of information has been intrinsically linked to the physical stuff on which the information was carried, such as a book, a photograph, an item of clothing or a compact disc. In digital culture the object itself loses significance compared to the information stored on it. Digital culture significantly complicates notions of ownership, not least of intellectual property such as ideas, or other forms of creativity. Music in digital form, for instance, can be repeated, sampled, edited or mashed up by people other than its original composer, in ways that were unimaginable in a pre-digital age.

This is significant, because it changes the nature of transaction. If information is passed from one person to another in an analogue form the transaction is relatively straightforward. Once the information is shared, both parties have it, and both effectively own it. When information is passed in digital format something different happens. If a person speaks into a digital phone, the sound waves are encoded into digits, which are then distributed and transported by an intermediary — an Internet Service Provider or a mobile phone company. The information is then collected, reassembled, and decoded so that the second person can receive it. Something novel has happened here. Between speaking and hearing, a new artefact has been created, a new piece of digital text. It is unclear who this information belongs to, and who has rights over it. Is it the speaker, or the hearer? Is it the company that carried the signal? Or the state? Or no one at all?

As we have seen, Augustine states that *frui* (enjoyment) is the mode of engaging with an other out of love, for its own sake, whereas *uti* (use) is the mode of engaging with it instrumentally, for the fulfilment of another purpose.[591] Where touch is translated from an immediate experience to a digital object, it necessarily becomes a distinct

[591] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.7, 9.

commodity: that is *uti* rather than *frui*. It is instrumentalised. Consequent upon that instrumentalisation there are commercial and political interests at play in digital culture, interests that transcend political and economic boundaries, indeed that make geographical states increasingly irrelevant as a way of organising society.

Teledildonic devices exemplify the commoditisation of sexual touch in a novel way. In *The Politics of the Body*, Alison Phipps opines that the commercial sex industry, (of which teledildonics are a part) is "a child of neo-liberal capitalism",[592] emerging from an economics of consumption in the developed world, and specifically from the free market rhetoric around the commodification of experiences. Touch is always in some sense transactional, in that it involves reciprocity, a mutual, albeit non-contingent, exchange of benefits between two or more persons. It is the mutuality of touch, and perhaps especially sexual touch, that marks it as different from a gift or the creative act of an individual. An act or object that is commodified is objectified for the purpose of trading, not necessarily in the narrow sense of exchange for money, but in the wider sense that the interaction is contingent.

Given that the digital mediation of touch, even in such a basic form as teledildonics, requires both mechanical and corporate intermediaries, novel issues arise, just as they do in the transfer of data about shopping preferences or images uploaded to the internet. The interpolation of an intermediary in the transaction is one of the points at which touch always becomes ethically problematic, and especially so where the mediation is monetised or otherwise contingent.

One example of the ways in which haptic technology opens itself to marketisation is the gamification of sexual encounter. Gamification is the intentional application of elements of game playing such as competition, point scoring, challenges and rewards, as incentives in the marketing of goods. It typically appeals to the competitive side of a consumer's nature, and is a key driver in digital marketing. Digital mediation in sexual encounter makes it possible for third parties to record, collect, publish compare and

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[592] Phipps, *The Politics of the Body*, 77-78.

repeat an individual's sexual history for profit. Teledildonic devices are in development that will provide feedback and review on sexual interactions, and publish the results online in much the same way that devices like *Fitbit*[593] track and publish data on an individual's exercise, weight and sleep patterns. The desire for self-monitoring is part of what Ward identifies as post-modernity's fascination with embodiment.[594] In a culture of quantified performance comparison, the monitoring and sharing of sexual engagement reinforces the conception of sex as a service that can be rated, in the way that Trip Advisor allows the rating of hotels and eBay encourages the rating of vendors. But how reliable can we expect a person's on-line sexual history to be, and as philosopher of technology Dr Dan O'Hara asks, who will own the datafication of one's sexual experience?[595] The young people who spoke with me at the Virtual Futures salon might have seen advantages as well as disadvantages to the prospect of sex with robots. But I doubt whether they would have wanted their experiences to be monitored, published, rated or re-sold.

In her work on sex robots,[596] Kathleen Richardson raises concerns about such marketisation, based on the asymmetry in digitally-mediated sexual relationships. She draws parallels between the use of machine-robots for sex, and 'real life' sex work. In sex work, the purchaser of sex generally takes on the status of subject. The sex worker is often denied this status, and may be reconstructed, renamed, etc., in the image desired by the purchaser. Pleasure is attributed to the sex worker, who is expected to

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[593] Fitbit is a brand name for a collection of digitally-enabled activity trackers marketed as aids to health and exercise <www.fitbit.com/uk/trackers> [accessed 20 January 2017].

[594] Graham Ward, 'The Metaphysics of the Body', 160.

[595] Dan O'Hara, unpublished comment in a seminar on Sex Robots at the Virtual Futures Salon, Library, Soho, London, 3 November 2015.

[596] Kathleen Richardson, 'The Asymmetrical "Relationship": Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots', *SIGCAS Computers and Society*, 45:3 (2015).

enact it in return for money. Richardson is critical of Levy[597] and others who see no down-side at all to the commodification of sex provided that the transaction is consensual. At first glance it might seem that teledildonic equipment could assuage some of Richardson's concerns about the imbalance of power in human–robot relationships, since both parties have equal access to an 'off' switch. But that is to assume that the only people involved in the transaction are the two users of the equipment. Of course, in conventional sex work, the one who pays for sex and the one who provides it are usually dependent on third-party brokers who have the potential to exploit the needs of both purchaser and provider. In addition, the contract for sex takes place within a wider cultural context in which society and the state have decisive roles.

In the same way, it would be naïve to imagine that the individuals who use teledildonic apparatus do so in isolation. They are dependent on third parties in the form of the manufacturers of the devices and the apps through which they operate, and also on the manufacturers of the computers or smart phones, and the Internet Service Providers who transmit the signals. By interposing the means of distribution into the sex relationship, touch becomes open to the engagement of the market or the state in terms of control and surveillance. In addition, whilst during a conventional sexual encounter the experience is self-contained, in a teledildonic sexual encounter a distinct and separate artefact is produced in the form of a digital file that carries potential moral and cultural weight. Whilst teledildonics may go some way towards rebalancing the power differentials between client and sex worker, or even between sexual partners with full agency, it adds significantly to the leverage of the intermediaries. Where sexual apparatus becomes a good, the market will create its own dynamic of relative values and up-selling, of consumer choice, envy and obsolescence, just as it does with every other electrical product. Phipps warns that

> Positioning commercial sex as an arena of transgressive identities and sexual self-expression is a partial perspective which tends to equate sexual freedom with a choice of pre-packaged commodities and ignores

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[597] Levy, *Love and Sex with Robots*.

the role of the capitalist system and other structures in shaping sexual discourses.[598]

Had he lived to see the development of teledildonics, Foucault might have regarded them as a welcome part of the discourse of liberation, but he would certainly have questioned the way that they place the individual users in a relationship of subjectivity to the machine-state. For

> the body is […] directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, perform ceremonies, emit signs.[599]

In other words, in as much as the user is acting upon the teledildonic machine, so also the machine in its commercial and political nexus is acting upon the user, shaping and even exploiting them in their political and sexual vulnerability.

There may be instances, such as commercially provided massage or even sex work, where a financial value is attached to inter-personal touch. When this happens, the ethical sensitivities are high. In its purest form, touch is exchanged freely. Rowan Williams writes that:

> if you treat the erotic relationship as a means for assuring relief of tension and a determinate set of satisfactions, what is lost in both cases is that vision of the self as *not* there to be possessed, to be completed or to serve another's completion; the vision of the self that is gratuitous or contingent in respect of any other's need, anyone else's agenda.[600]

The possibility of touching without possession or contingency is dependent on there being no independent value placed on the touch itself. It is entirely self-interpreting, and the value that it has depends on a mutually understood set of meanings that are partly societally established, and partly negotiated through time and experience

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[598] Phipps, *The Politics of the Body*, 76 ff.

[599] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

[600] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 196.

between the toucher and the touchee. Depth of meaning and value cannot be economic. It cannot be created by scarcity or abundance, but by the hard work of developing mutual understanding, a common language of touch that necessarily goes beyond words into the territory of gift and trust.

CHAPTER NINE

FINISHING TOUCH

The fact that we have bodies is the oldest joke there is.[601]
C. S. Lewis

<u>1   Reaching for a theology of touch</u>

At the start of this thesis I asked whether touch is fungible. In other words, can the sensation of touch be synthesised or digitally transmitted without loss or alteration of meaning? The impetus for asking the question is that we are in a period of rapid technological and cultural development in which technology is enabling us to communicate with and through machines in unprecedented haptic ways. It is important to ask what exactly might be gained or lost if we swap out the experience of plain touch, and swap in a haptic simulation such as a teledildonic device.

Touch is a heterogeneous phenomenon with complex, multiple and intertwining meanings. Physiologically as well as culturally, touch is an "assortment of variably integrated perceptual achievements. No phenomenological or non-phenomenological characteristics serve to characterise them all, while excluding all other kinds of perception."[602] It is caught up in the uncertain boundaries of the body itself, and it is prone to the philosophical, social and commercial drivers that tend to the understanding of the human body as a machine, or vice-versa. All in all, touch is a slippery business. It is hard to pin down.

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[601] C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), 117.

[602] Ratcliffe, 'What Is Touch?', 431.

In chapter two I discussed how the essential coincidence of touching and perceiving, the reflexivity or *chiasm* with which Merleau-Ponty grappled in his later writings,[603] is unique to touch among the senses. Merleau-Ponty could hardly have imagined that digital technology could all but sever the coincidence of touching and perceiving, of the thing and its presence in space and time, so that it would be possible to feel that you were feeling something, even though the sensation had been generated in a different place and time. This 'real presence' is the very thing that is most radically challenged by digital mediation.

Touch is coextensive with life, and the reflexivity involved in plain human touch makes it fundamental to defining personhood in community. For Merleau-Ponty, "perception and embodiment […] are not mere *properties* of minds or subjects, but constitutive elements of our *being in the world.*"[604] In particular, the experience of touching and being touched indicates to us the difference between self and other. When I touch something other than myself, I know that that something is not me. In most cases I can easily discern whether or not the thing that is not me is a person. The novel challenge of digital culture is that technology may be able to isolate and replicate touch sensations and translate them into data, detaching them from space and time and reproducing them elsewhere, to the extent that it might not be possible to tell whether I am touching or being touched by some*one* or some*thing*.

Touch is a storied phenomenon.[605] Every instance of touch takes place within a narrative context, and is therefore culturally significant. There is always 'before' and 'after' the touch. This means that contact between persons and objects and other persons is not just a succession of occurrences, but has a structure and significance that are open to hermeneutical interpretation. It would not be fanciful to say that the whole of human history is a narrative of people touching the world and each other,

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[603] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133.

[604] Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, 33.

[605] See chapter five, section 3.3, pages 188-191.

and the quest to discover what, if anything, that has meant. That meaning, of course, is a mystery which, following Rowan Williams, we are to approach with humility and awe.

For theology, touch might be considered a rather significant mystery, given its significance in Christian ecclesiology and ethics, and the centrality of the notion that God has touched the earth and its people. The problem of definition lends itself to a theological approach that is both constructive and apophatic. It is constructive in that we need to adopt a multi-faceted approach to understanding touch, and it is apophatic in that it is easier to recognise what it is not, than what it is. Practically speaking, in relation to digitally synthesised touch, such as the tactile communication between a person and a machine, it is easier to define what might be lost than what might be gained.

If we understand touch as constitutive of personhood, the distinction between 'good touch' and 'bad touch' need not rest solely on gender, consent or ownership, but on the desire to be recognised in the recognition of the other. In chapter three I explored how Rowan Williams suggests that we understand ourselves to be persons as we recognise the desire that another being who we recognise as a person has for us, and we recognise ourselves to be creatures as we recognise the loving gaze of God the creator. Williams has usually described this recognition in ocularcentric terms, but it makes at least as much sense to describe it in tactile terms, especially when we are considering sexual desire and pleasure. Touch can be generative in the affirmation of the personhood of an other, or it can be destructive. If we follow Williams in understanding personhood as irreducible, then touch can be experienced by either touch*er* or touch*ee* as either humanising, or as dehumanising. If touch is a significant constituent of personhood in relationship, it will be important that we can identify the 'real presence' of another person, and to know whether we are touching, or being touched by, a person or a thing.

As haptic technology becomes increasingly sophisticated, we may find ourselves

less able to give a clear answer. This is an issue not only for touch, but for other senses too. When we call a company's telephone helpline, how can we know whether the voice at the end of the phone is a person communicating with us in real time, or a sophisticated bot programmed to deal with customer enquiries? When we see a video of a politician on the campaign trail, how can we be certain whether the words and pictures represent him or her, or whether they have been created by a bad actor using artificial intelligence?

I want to suggest that a theology of touch could be premised on the assumption that the nature of touch is only fully realised in an eschatological context. C. S. Lewis illustrates this vividly in his extended parable *The Great Divorce*. He describes a land (which we understand to be paradise) in which the grass is hard and sharp, a leaf is as heavy as a sack of coal, and everything is "so much solider than things in our country."[606] The implication here is that our experience and understanding of plain human touch is derived from an eschatological reality that is beyond current perception. The 'real presence' of a person touching us is a pre-realisation of the touch of God that is beyond the present. In this context, touch that is synthesised or digitally represented by a machine stands in a relationship of analogy to plain touch (to use language which I have defined in a previous chapter). This analogy is grounded in efficient causality, just as our current realisation of plain touch is derived from its *telos* in the post-resurrection community. It follows that machines cannot touch us in the same way, or with the same richness of meaning, that persons do. The sensation of touch is potentially replicable, but it is not fully fungible, because the interpretation of touch cannot pass unaltered between a machine and a person. It is the very replicability of the data that makes it different from what I have called plain touch.[607]

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[606] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce,* (London: Geoffrey Bles,1946), 27.

[607] See page six, footnote five for my working definition of 'plain touch'.

In the context of a discussion about the eucharist, Gerard Loughlin gives a helpful analogy (borrowed from Gareth Moore) of the way in which a five pound note is validated not only by its appearance, but also by its institution and use.

> There is...a difference, a substantial difference, between a genuine and a forged five pound note. One is issued by authority, the other not. Institution and use makes the five pound note what it is.[608]

The analogy is not perfect (as Loughlin acknowledges) because it is primarily functional. In the case of touch (or of the eucharist) there is an irreducible exteriority, an otherness about the other, that moves the meaning beyond intentionality or context to a 'real' that I have described as having sacramental qualities. When a computer connects to another computer, they effectively become one larger computer. When a person touches an object there is a series of physiological responses and complex cultural meanings, but it is still essentially an earthbound event.

When a person touches another person there is no absolute joining, but there is a sacramental event involving the real and enduring presence of two separate persons, with spiritual consequences. This kind of sacramental touch can only be realised in the present tense. It cannot be entirely replicated. Neither can is be delayed or transmitted externally. It is a here and now thing, that can nevertheless be interpreted appropriately in the light of a greater eschatological reality.

In conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Rowan Williams and others, I have sought to establish that touch is an event in which meaning is created and recognised. It is a word of expression, an event in space and time, that simultaneously asserts and recognises the meaningfulness of the touch*er* and the touch*ee*, and also the reality of the relationship of love, desire or whatever else passes between them. And this word is not simply an aspect or condition of personhood, but is also constitutive. Williams

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[608] Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 231.

suggests that the personal is what discloses and is disclosed in relation. The word is not just a part of the person reaching out to the universe, but encapsulates and expresses the whole person.

Sacraments are essentially human creations in which something extra-human is birthed. When a person touches another person, something occurs that is potentially greater than the physical event, the affirmation of the real presence of persons. There is vulnerability in this, but it also has the potential to be generative; to create a dehiscence, a new thing, an eruption of significance that makes a mark in the world that neither party could have made individually.

In human engagement with digital or machine culture, the direction of that engagement becomes critically important. So in *Communion and Otherness*, John Zizioulas celebrates the achievements of human creativity. Creativity requires a person to exercise control over reality, so that the things that are created acquire a presence in the world. Nevertheless, only the human is present as "a unique and unrepeatable *hypostasis* of being" rather than an element in a wider mechanism.[609] Genuine creativity, Zizioulas says,

> is entirely the achievement of personhood, a distinctly unique capacity of man, which, unlike other technological achievements, is not threatened by the emergent intelligent beings of computer science.[610]

To speak of being 'threatened' is to frame the progression in a negative way. We may not be threatened by emergent intelligent beings, or by haptic technology, or even by teledildonic devices, which was where we started. Nevertheless, we have significant

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[609] Whilst Zizioulas asserts that personhood belongs uniquely to humans, others may feel that humans belong on a spectrum of life forms (e.g. Peter Singer), or that personhood is dependent on recognition (e.g. Robert Spaemann) and could in principle be assigned to higher animals.

[610] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 216.

choices to make about the ways in which we engage with digital technology, and the ways in which, in that context, we understand and construct the significance of touch. We have a lot to lose, if we lose touch. As Leopoldina Fortunati writes, "beyond the remaining old poverty, which exists even in the industrialized nations, the new poverty that affects everybody is a poverty of first-hand reality".[611] Perhaps it is better to frame the issue positively; to ask whether and how we wish to recognise the sacramental qualities of human touch as a potential locus of grace and revelation. The key to that, I believe, is to understand touch in an eschatological context.

2   Touch in eschatological context

Much of twenty-first century western culture is marked by a paradox in its approach to the human body. One the one hand, we invest in the body, idealising it in its unapologetic corporeality through fashion, food, fitness, medicine and mass media. On the other hand, we seek to escape our materiality through dreams of digital immortality.[612] The aspiration to overcome the limitations of mortality, of ageing, death and decay has been one of the fundamental drivers of digital culture. Whilst technologists may enthuse about the creation of android sex robots, few of them are excited about creating a robot that can have sex with you like a 65 year-old man! Digital culture tends to reach for eternal youth and immortality. In contrast, the Christian tradition foregrounds decay and death, followed not by the survival of disembodied information, but by the resurrection of the body.

Sarah Coakley believes that "the obsessive interest in the 'body' which has been such a marked feature of late twentieth-century Western culture hides a profound

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[611] Leopoldina Fortunati, 'The Human Body: Natural and Artificial Technology', in *Machines That Become Us,* ed. by James E. Katz (London: Routledge, 2003), 75.

[612] See, for example, Nathan Mladin, *AI and the Afterlife: From Digital Mourning to Mind Uploading* (London: Theos, 2024) ,<www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/AI-and-Afterlife-report-Update.pdf> [Accessed 19 January 2025].

eschatological longing."[613] She is somewhat scornful of contemporary culture's inability to reach for anything other than more of the bodily same.

> Devoid now of religious meaning or of the capacity for any fluidity into the divine, shorn of any expectation of new life beyond the grave, it has shrunk to the limits of individual fleshliness; hence our only hope seems to reside in keeping it alive, youthful, consuming, sexually active, and jogging on (literally), for as long as possible.[614]

The desire to take the experience of touch to another level, for example by replicating, enhancing or mediating it through mechanical or digital transmission, is an example of this pervasive human desire for transcendence, coupled with technological optimism. One instance would be the transhumanist poet and philosopher Ollivier Dyens, who writes optimistically that

> the virtual being is real, but of a different kind of real, one that is both organic and technological. This being is a cultural animal, a nonorganic being. The cultural being is in a new stage of evolution.[615]

Elaine Graham also recognises that desire when she writes that

> the philosophies and practices of transhumanism exhibit a will for transcendence of the flesh as an innate and universal trait, a drive to overcome physical and material reality and strive towards omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality.[616]

Coakley discerns in the post-Butler 'queer theology' project

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[613] Sarah Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God' in *Modern Theology* 16 (2000), 61.

[614] Sarah Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', 62.

[615] Ollivier Dyens, *Metal and Flesh: The Evolution of Man: Technology Takes Over* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001), 33.

[616] Elaine Graham, '"Nietzsche Gets a Modem": Transhumanism and the Techno-logical Sublime', *Literature and Theology,* 16.1 (2002), 69.

an unconscious gesturing to an eschatological horizon which will give mortal flesh final significance, a horizon in which the restless, fluid post-modern 'body' can find some sense of completion without losing its mystery, without succumbing again to 'appropriate' or restrictive gender roles.[617]

John Zizioulas is wholly positive about the longing for transcendence. He sees it as a fundamental urge for salvation through communion.

The overcoming of death represents a longing rooted in the *personhood* of man. It also means that this overcoming is a matter of turning the presence-in-absence of being into presence-without-absence and this is not a matter of inherent capabilities of a 'substantial' character but of *personal communion.*[618]

Political philosopher Erin Manning, though not starting from a Christian world view, nevertheless frames touch in an eschatological context, recognising that it is always reaching for the future.

To touch is always to attempt to touch the incorporeality of a body, to touch what *is* not yet. I do not touch the you that I think you are, I reach toward the one you will become.[619]

The yearning to 'reach toward', to escape the spatio-temporal limitations of the physical, and to embrace what Dyens calls "a different kind of real", is not necessarily antithetical to Christianity, if we understand that post-resurrection touch has the potential to subvert and undermine the strictures of space and time, the structures of abuse, and the powers of the patriarchy and the nation-state complex. But is this 'reaching toward' achieved through trans- or post-humanism, the blasting through of the finitudes of human existence? Or is it instead achieved through an acceptance of the reality of the real, followed by an eschatological transformation, a route through death to life?

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[617] Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', 70.

[618] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 227-228. (Italics original).

[619] Manning, *Politics of Touch*, xix.

It is in the nature of matter that physical abilities are finite. Things fall apart. By contrast, in principle at least, digital information is virtually imperishable. If a compact disc becomes unplayable, it is because of the corruption of the physical object, or the redundancy of the machinery used to play it. The information itself is intangible, so whilst it may become useless, it is not subject to decay. Perversely though, the very finitude of the human body is part of its nature. "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies", Jesus says in John's gospel, "it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."[620] If we reduce touch to mere information, its very incorruptibility robs it of some of its significance. Cut and paste it, duplicate it and send it elsewhere, and the weight of meaning it carries is not increased but decreased.

In everyday life, touch creates and defines the boundaries between the body and the world. Touch also has a capacity to transgress those boundaries, and to make two things as if one, at least temporarily. This temporary oneness may point to a permanence in an eschatological future, in which touch between bodies need no longer be a boundary, but all are *in touch*. Early Christian discourse in this respect emerged from Graeco-Roman cultural and social norms, and also pointed to the disruptive possibilities of the eschaton.[621] The body of Christ, realised in the church, prefigures this body of Christ realised in its eschatological fulness. Sarah Coakley sees evidence of this in Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*

> It is not that either 'body' or gender are disposed of in this progressive transformation to a neo-angelic status. Rather, as advances are made in the stages of virtue and contemplation, eros finds its truer meaning in God, and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of ascent.[622]

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[620] John 12:24.

[621] Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2009), 129.

[622] Coakley, 'The Eschatological Body', 69.

As we explored in chapter six, the detailed regulation of touch, as expressed in the Levitical laws of Early Israel, established the boundaries of the community of God's favour. The people of God were delineated by haptic encounter, in other words by what their members might or might not touch, and by what they understood as the touch of God. In his human person, Jesus transformed the significance of touch, from being understood primarily as a source of contamination and judgement, to being a means of grace, healing and blessing. This could only have happened in the particularity of time and place experienced in his incarnate body. It pre-figured the equally particular but also infinite eschatological body that he assumed at his resurrection.

This perhaps explains why, in John's gospel, neither Mary nor Thomas appears to touch his post-resurrection body. After the resurrection, Jesus' own fully incarnate body, with its fundamental capacity to touch and be touched but also to materialise across time and space, constitutes the eternal and tangible presence of God in all things. Individual Christians, with their as yet more limited capacity to understand and act through the medium of touch, become literally incorporated into the transformed body of Christ. The eschatological community is still constituted by the shared touch of its members, but now Levitical laws do not define the perimeter of the community. Instead, the members of Christ's body are united both in and beyond time and space. In this eschatological context, we are as we were in our mother's womb, in that we are touched and held at every point, and we hold and touch at every point. Like unborn children, we have no schema with which to interpret what we feel. Instead we know fully, even as we are fully known.[623]

I have written elsewhere of the implications of embodied resurrection in the context of my own (now thankfully excised) cancerous tumour. During the years that I carried this tumour internally, it touched me entirely and I held it, largely unaware, like an

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[623] 1 Corinthians 13:12.

anti-foetus within my body. Now that it is gone and is no longer available for me to touch, I realise that

> to love the parts of me that are dead or dying is to recognize the grace of God and the real possibility of resurrection. Consequently, my cancerous cells remain a very real part of me, not objectified or spiritualized but a tangible reminder of transience and hope. My disease has a prophetic role in the community too, pointing from the present to the future that God has in store. Even my excised tumour has a role to play, leading the way before me to resurrection life. Wherever it is, and in whatever decomposed state, it is part of the earth in which God lives, and in which the remainder of my body will eventually join it. It is the first fruits of my resurrection. My cancerous tumour is not my enemy, but a reminder that none of us are yet what we can be and will be.[624]

I want to suggest that a theology of touch belongs in such an eschatological context. By that, I mean that if we allow our understanding of touch to be reduced to the merely physiological or cultural, we will have grasped only a part of what touch is and can be. If touch is a doorway (to borrow Alexander Schmemann's imagery) through which we can achieve and recognise personhood in ourselves and others, then that personhood becomes recognisable in, and is validated by, the incarnation of Christ, and is re-actualised in the sacraments of the church. Like all sacraments, our present experience of touch is rooted in space and time, but its ultimate meaning lies beyond both.

Viewed with an eschatological perspective, touch is a super-sense; a hyper-reality to which living humans as yet have only partial access. If our understanding of touch is limited or earthbound, then the limitation is firmly on the human side. We have that in common with Mary in the Garden of Gethsemane, Thomas in the Upper Room and the disciples in Luke 24:39, who were invited to touch the risen Christ, but like Thomas, did not apparently do so.

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[624] Andrew Graystone, 'Should I Love my Tumour?', in *Suffering and the Christian Life,* ed. by Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (London: T. and T. Clark, 2020), 153.

In considering these passages, many commentators on the gospels focus on the question of the nature of Jesus' post-resurrection body. But perhaps it is the *pre-resurrection* bodies of Mary, Thomas and the others that were the limiting factor in the encounters. Thomas and Mary had eyes that were well-enough equipped to perceive the risen Christ, and ears equipped to hear and recognize his voice, but as we have seen, touch is rather different. It is a reciprocal sense. It may be that although the risen Christ was fully tangible, the as-yet un-resurrected Thomas and Mary were not equipped with the sensory powers necessary to receive the sensation of touching a body that was in its most fully realized form. Hence, although the risen Christ was tangible, it was better for them not to touch him until they too attained had resurrection bodies.

The resurrected Christ had qualities that appear to be extra-corporeal. The gospels record that he appeared bodily in locked rooms, vanished before the eyes of the disciples, and was sometimes unrecognisable to them (John 20:14; Luke 24:16). And yet he was also clearly corporeal. Jesus shared food with his disciples (John 21:13–15) and he was fully visible to them (Luke 24:39). He was both like and unlike the pre-resurrected person they had known and travelled with.

C.S. Lewis summed this up when he wrote that the sudden appearances and disappearances of Christ suggest the ghost of popular tradition. Yet Christ in the gospels emphatically insists that he is not merely a spirit, and takes steps to demonstrate that his risen body can still perform animal operations such as eating. Lewis attempts an explanation:

> If the story is true, then a being still in some mode, though not our mode, corporeal, withdrew at His own will from the Nature presented by our own three dimensions and five senses, not necessarily into the non-sensuous and undimensioned but possibly into, or through, a world or worlds of super-sense and super-space.[625]

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[625] C. S. Lewis, *Essential C. S. Lewis,* ed. by Lyle W. Dorsett (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 341.

The suggestion is that the ampleness of the sense of touch is realised only in its eschatological fulfilment. The physical experience of touch in space and time is only a part of what touch can be. Just as the rules around touch that delineated the community of Early Israel were transformed by the coming of Christ so that touch was no longer a means of contamination but of blessing, so in the post-resurrection reality, the sense of touch is transformed again to a fuller sense, through which we can know and communicate in ways that are as yet unavailable to us. Karen O'Donnell calls this 'stretchy flesh', a sensation that, far from being diminished by mortality, is instead "an amplification of the natural".[626]

The nearest we can get to this state is perhaps its expression in the eucharist, which has at the same time one location and many, and has the power to touch humans in both physical and super-physical ways. Graham Ward notes, with regard to the nature of the Eucharistic body, that

> it is actually the translocationality that is surprising - as if place and space itself is being redefined such that one can be a body here and also there, one can be this kind of body here and that kind of body there.[627]

Plain touch distinguishes the self from the other. It evidences both the *nearness* and the *distance* of the other. That is true of the touch of two human persons, and it is equally true of the touch of an embodied person and God. Christian theology suggests that we live in an in-between period in which God is both known and unknown. The function of human touch is exploratory and creative, but the end of that exploration is not yet grasped.

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[626] Karen O'Donnell, *Stretchy Flesh Theological Anthropology for Online Spaces* (2020) <https://www.academia.edu/42243426/Stretchy_Flesh_Theological_Anthropology_for_Online_Spaces> [accessed 3 April 2024].

[627] Ward, *Cities of God*, 103.

Herein lies the dilemma which Merleau-Ponty recognised in Paul Cezanne as he worked on his doomed attempt to realise objects in paint. This too, is the source of the pain of separation that couples can experience in their most intimate encounters. In the post-resurrection period, Thomas, Mary and the others found themselves within touching distance of God in Christ, and yet simultaneously at an infinite distance. Paul also described the tension inherent in this, when he told the Athenians that

> the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.
>
> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps *reach out* for him and find him, though *he is not far from any one of us*.[628]

For this reason, John Zizioulas writes of the possibility of 'presence' which is represented by one human being touching another as being at once both glorious and tragic. It is glorious, in as much as the 'language' of touch understood in the common schema that is uniquely developed by humans, reveals that we are not alone. There is someone in here, and there is someone else out there. We recognise each other through the mundane experiences of the senses. We recognise each other because we have a common creator, who speaks the language of all of the senses of which humans are capable, as well as those of which, as yet, we are not.

At the same time, the possibility of co-presence is tragic, because it evidences "the paradoxical fact [that] being in and through the human person is ultimately revealed as an *absence*."[629] Through our senses we realise that we cannot be alone; but neither can we be ultimately together, at least whilst we only have our current senses to rely

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[628] Acts 17:24–27.

[629] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 216.

upon. This is what it means to be a prisoner of the Fall, and to occupy what Paul calls a 'body of death'. But, he says, "Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"[630] Extraordinarily, this deliverance requires us to follow Christ in passing beyond physical death to a state that is supra-physical; a state that we literally cannot imagine, but can only glimpse in the resurrected Christ, and in the sharing in eucharist as part of Christ's body. The limitations of human touch represent an obstacle to the full realisation of our humanity, locked in time and space, and at the same time a doorway through which we may supersede it.

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[630] Romans 7:25.

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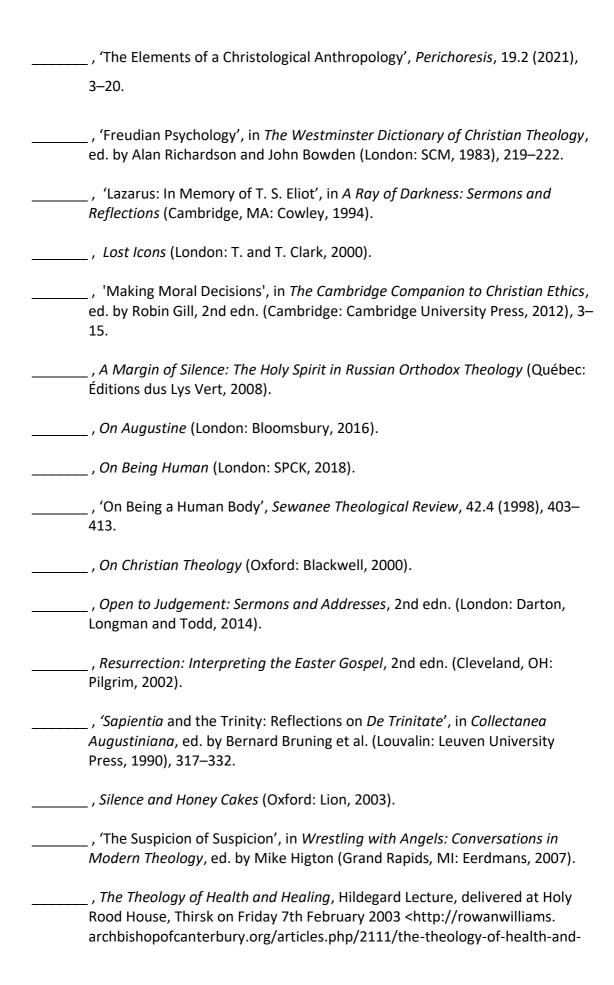Robinson, H. Wheeler, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1947).

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