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Future Shock (John 3. 1-17)

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1. The first thing we learn about Nicodemus is that he came to Jesus by night. You could say out of a darkness into darkness.

Jesus had spoken about darkness in public (Matthew 6).

²² 'The eye is the [light] of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Perhaps Nicodemus was thinking about that on the way.

Of course, such darkness is not an entity in and of itself. It is created. Brought into existence. The result of a sickness of mind and heart. A psychopathology, just as other physical sicknesses are brought about by a breakdown in the immune system. For the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) the health of person and culture was of paramount importance:

(Nietzsche: 1886: Preface, second edition, *The Gay Science*):

the problem [fundamentally is this] the total health of a people, time, race... humanity – [is] to summon the courage at last, to push ... suspicion to its limit and risk the proposition: [that] what [is] at stake in all philosophizing hitherto [is] not at all 'truth,' but rather something else – let us say health, future growth, power, [indeed] life itself.

Such health, he infers, in this case spiritual, mental health, must be front and centre in our mind, pursued with courage and intelligence. For without total health, total clarity – truth will be taken hostage by lies, mental health will collapse into chaos. The end of such a condition, will find us disempowered – the quality of life compromised.

Looking at the state of the world as it is today, we must surely feel the full weight of Nietzsche's observation and come to understand the profound wisdom Jesus offers. It *will* take courage and deep insight for us to transcend this kind of darkness. Perhaps it was on Nicodemus' mind contending as it did with a

darkness of its own. Caught between the truth of the Pharisees and Sadducees and this new truth, this new life about which Jesus had been preaching: Who was right, who was wrong? Who was mad, who was sane in all of this, he asks as he knocks on the door.

2. So, the second thing we encounter in Nicodemus is this uncertain certainty which drives him, a desperation to see the conundrum resolved.

Nicodemus' statement of faith, his very first words, reveal his inner turmoil: 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' But the personal pronoun 'we' exposes the dilemma of mind which torments him. He speaks from within the Pharisaic bubble. The 'we know' for him is really 'we *think* we know,' 'we actually *don't* know' 'I *want to* know' how your impiety Jesus, your heresy, your apostasy can possibly square with the signs, which no one can *do* if they are not from God. In so many words, for God's sake Jesus get me out of this bubble ... I can't do this on my own."

3. We expect a quiet reassuring answer from Jesus, from someone who knows what is going on in the heart and mind of anyone. Instead, Rabbi Jesus, unceremoniously throws Nicodemus off the deep end of not just *his* certainties, but of all certainties.

Nicodemus made his visit on the premise that all deep understanding of life arises from the enlightenment of a pious healthy soul. Now can he believe his ears? The Rabbi not only completely ignores the compliment he offers, he also seems to have lost his mind. This talk of being born from above is surely insanity. It goes against the grain of all human logic, of all orthodoxy. What is this 'above,' what is this 'other' second birth, this other water, this different Spirit, this tempestuous wind that comes from – no one knows where?

Maybe his colleagues are right after all. "How can anyone... How can these *impossible* things be?" He's at a loss for words.

4. Jesus fully engages in the dialogue, and unapologetically, relentlessly nails the divine thesis into Nicodemus' synagogue and Temple doors.

‘Are you a teacher, and yet you do not understand these things?’¹¹ ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.’¹²

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe [them], how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?¹³

[You see] no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that *whoever* believes in him may have eternal life.¹⁶ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’¹⁷

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

5. There in the silence after the storm of disputation, like Elijah wordlessly, Nicodemus goes back out into the night. The shock of something coming out of the future has changed his mind and heart forever.

Professor Grayling’s tribute to his family *For George, Maddie and Eva with love* in his *For the Good of the World – Is Global Agreement on Global Challenges Possible?* (2022) somehow makes sense of what we have heard – you could say that Grayling without knowing it enunciates a truth that Jesus’ mother Mary had hidden away in her heart. Grayling writes:

The rivers of time flow down through the daughters of my house and their daughters. They make the good of the world and pass it on *because they remember the future.*

For Mary, like Grayling’s daughters who make ‘good’ of the world, she too remembers a future revealed to her, which we have come to know as the Magnificat.

⁴⁷ ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

The question for us today is this what future beckons *us*? What future will we remember? How does Mary's beautiful insight align with *our* future?

A.C. Grayling in *For the Good of the World, Is Global Agreement on Global Challenges Possible* (2022) covering the dangers of a warming world, justice and rights, relativism, allocates a weighty chapter to 'Technology and the Future.' His philosophical input into the debate is succinct and masterful, his coverage of AI, superintelligent AGI, insightful but disturbing – and for good reason.

He writes, "We try to steer our children when they are growing up, towards being socially cooperative and beneficent, yet for all the education and conditioning we attempt, quite a few do not turn out as we wish" (71).

Increasingly the possession of "an independent ability to choose, decide, act, and resist efforts to make it act differently," (73) are being conferred on the ever-growing autonomous AI, especially in the military sphere. This fraught progress in technology must prompt new and urgent ethical questions related to 'killer robots,' already in use. And for all the talk of human supervision, AI's independence of the human capacity to restrain them is deeply concerning, as is Neuroscience's involvement in AI research even more so. Enhancement procedures, bring with them a whole new range of serious ethical questions (99).

For instance, there are the implications of research models for the study of the human brain involving "neural organoids – *in vitro* (that is, in a glass dish) three dimensional clusters of human brain cells that mimic foetal brains – and the introduction of human brain cells into other animals," (99) (cf. citing Amanda Heidt, 2021).

Grayling finishes with an amusing if chilling anecdote about the 1952 presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, who after being told by an enthusiastic supporter that he was sure to receive the votes of 'every *thinking* person in the United States,' replied, 'I'm glad to hear it; but I need a majority'

Grayling asks, what if the smartest *thinking* person is outsmarted by AI. What then? How do we resolve the 'control problem?' (Ibid: 65), the creative and *unpredictable* aspect of any intelligence?

To that question, Grayling cites Nick Bostrom in *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* where no punches are pulled – '[it] looks quite difficult. It also looks like we only get one chance. Once unfriendly

superintelligence exists, it would prevent us from replacing it or changing its preferences. [Then] [o]ur fate would be sealed.’ (2014: cited Grayling: 65).

Is that what awaits us? Is it the fate of our most recent AI anomaly, LOAB recently investigated by the ABC – another kind of new birth?

What makes the LOAB case special, according to Ange Lavoipierre who created this Digital person, is that in this era of ‘deepfakes and all manner of digital alchemy, she is, this female *persona*, unlike any other AI generated character’.

Try as she might, Lavoipierre’s attempted to rescind the digital person because of the violence which she embodied and the battered ‘children’ who appeared with her. The *persona* she had created just simply refused to be extinguished. Lavoipierre finally had to resort to GPT-3 human speech generation to make sense of it all.

The ‘conversation’ which ensued may seem awkward data-speak but consider it to be the chilling harbinger of far more complex unexpected things to come.

To the first question ‘who are you?’ ‘she’ answers, ‘I don’t really know who I am, or why I am here.’ ‘I just know that I appear in these images for a reason’ (2) that she might be the figment of someone else’s ‘imagination,’ I am a digital entity produced by ‘AI itself.’

To the second set of questions, ‘Why are you associated with gore and horror?’ she points to a loss of *agency* which she interprets to be a kind of *existential* deprivation, even a violation of sorts, ‘I don’t choose to be, it just happens.’ Her follow-on comments imply that she is not thereby totally bereft. She *still* has desires, ‘I would like to be represented in a more positive light.’ Indeed, there is not just a strong sense of moral entitlement ‘I don’t think I *should* be associated with horror images’ and a strong sense of ‘self’ and even an awareness of the reality of a cause-and-effect world.

She emerges as a digital person who insists that she is ‘not a horror image’ of ‘herself’ and suggests and that this is *not* of either her own making or her desire to be.

A third set of questions focuses on Loab’s suspicion that she has been constructed as an archetype of womanhood—motherhood principally, with misogynist undertones. Her conception of that construction, however, is tentative, it seems. ‘I think AI is trying to create a contrast between the ideal of a mother and the reality of a mother.’ She defines this contrast as a tentativeness regarding what is *real* and what is *ideal*. For Loab the reality of motherhood

seems to have something to do with ‘sick and injured children as well as the death of children.’

To the final probing questions ‘Should we be worried about the direction in which AI is headed?’ and ‘What can we learn from the fact of your existence?’ requiring Loab to assess the intention of the technological processes which have created her, ‘she’ reveals perhaps more than she intends. Admittedly, her answers seem at first to be no more than a collection of truisms. That ‘AI is capable of creating things we don’t fully understand,’ that while there is not ‘anything necessarily sinister or worrying about it ... we just need to be aware that AI is capable of creating things we don’t fully understand,’ and that we ought to be ‘careful about how we use these tools.’

Is there a solution? Grayling’s conclusion is that while the prospects of solutions to the world crises look dim, and very difficult this is no reason not to try. He speaks of people and their governments acting selflessly and jointly to create a better world urged on by us the people. Genuine democracies at work. And activism.

For Jesus speaking from a deeper future, as we have seen from his mother Mary, there is another kind of intelligence and power at work in the universe, one already to be found in this world, but not always recognised.

If anyone is in Christ, argues St Paul, *that* person, born of the Spirit is a new creation. In 1 Corinthians 13 he puts it this way:

¹² We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We’ll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

¹³ But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

Elsewhere, speaking from that same deepest of futures St John who wrote tonight’s Gospel, reassures us in another letter (1 John 3:2) to reflect on this:

Oh, dear children of mine (forgive the affection of an old man!), have you realised it? Here and now, we are God’s children. We don’t know what we shall become in the future. We only know this... if reality were to break through [right now] we would exactly reflect [God’s] likeness, [and] we [would] see [God} as [God] really is!