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Final Paper

THEO 489

Algorithms are a largely mysterious entity that have shaped nearly every piece of technology that we interact with. They have become an increasingly large part of our everyday lives, often without us knowing or realizing it. They affect how we think, what we do in our free time, and the relationships that we form with the people around us. Ideas from Christian theology can be applied to reflect on our current relationship with algorithms and how they affect the parts of our lives that Christian theology says are important. An area of life that Christian theology has said to be important for human fulfillment is cultivating good relationships with others. As algorithms do more and more in our daily lives, they inevitably play a role in our relationships. Through many of the algorithms implemented in today's technology, the user's attention is subconsciously shifted from what they chose to be important to them to what algorithms choose is important to them. Christian theology argues that the subconscious shift in attention that this causes is harmful to human's relationships with others and in their personal life.

Over the years, many Christian theologians have given ways for humans build a better life that leads to more fulfillment. They offer us ideas in what makes our lives better and lay a foundation for how we should approach thinking about what leads to our own personal fulfillment. Christian theology tells us what will lead to a good human life and gives us many factors contribute to a good human life. These factors consist of what fulfills us, practices that help or not, and character traits such as virtues or vices. Many Christian theologians have written pieces about these topics, which will be explored in depth later in this paper. Theologians and

Christian thinkers discussed in this paper share a common trait of intentionally shaping their relationships and habits through intentional practices that contribute to a good human life.

As someone could use ideas from Christian theologians to intentionally shape their relationships and values, one's relationships and values easily can be unintentionally shaped by the algorithms that they are using in their day to day to lives. Many algorithms implemented in the applications we use today are designed to be addictive. The addictive nature of these algorithms shifts the user's focus towards the apps using these algorithms. These apps then shape how people think and how they interact with others. In an article discussing how human enhancements are perceived by the public, researchers Menuz, Hurlimann, and Godard discuss some of the reasons that the public view of human enhancements has changed over time. They claim, "The values we ourselves consider important are influenced by passive coercion, manipulation, and persuasion" (Menuz 169). This idea can be applied to shape how we think about algorithms. Many algorithms are built with a goal to manipulate and persuade people into thinking a certain way. This deliberate manipulation shapes how we spend our free time and the things we think about. Through this coercion and manipulation, we may find our actions aligning with values that we do not consider to be important to us.

It may seem like it shouldn't be any more of a challenge to remain true to the values that one has learned from Christianity. Many of the values learned from Christian theology are meant to turn us into better, kinder, more understanding people who are ultimately better friends with stronger relationships. After all, no matter the time period, we should expect some degree of others trying to influence us. One of the first stories of all time involves a snake trying to manipulate a woman to eat a forbidden apple, despite her knowing that her values (her commitment to follow God's word) did not align with this action. The problem with the

algorithms today is that it opens so many more opportunities for people or corporations to have that ability to influence and manipulate us. And much like the snake in the story of Adam and Eve, our best interests are not considered. The algorithms of today are constantly telling us that we need to buy that extra item to feel happy, that our neighbors are doing so much better than us, or our friends are not as cool as someone else's friends. Much like in the story of Adam and Eve, after enough manipulation from outside forces, we start to make choices that do not align with our values which ultimately end up hurting our relationships.

Focus is an incredibly important aspect of human life. Without focus, we are just aimlessly wandering towards some unknown destination. We need time to focus on what is important in our lives and decide what we want our destination to be and the important roads we must take in order to reach that destination. In his book *Living Into Focus*, Boers discusses the importance of focus in our lives. He discusses the lessened need for focus as modern technology allows our lives to move faster. We don't need focus in the way that we did before because so many tasks can be done so easily and we can just move on to the next thing. Many of the technologies created today are aimed to bring ideas, goods, or services to us quicker than ever before. But is this all a good thing? Upon reflection on where the technologies of today have brought us, Boers states "People feel distracted, disoriented, dissipated, and despairing. They sense that there is something more, and their deep yearning is a response to the mad pace of their lives" (Boers 11). The technology that we use today has been largely influenced by the algorithms that allow these technologies to work. These algorithms increase the pace of our lives. At the end of the day, most people realize that they do not want this insane, intense pace of life, but unfortunately cannot escape it.

In a society that has many technologies focused on increasing the pace of life, it is easy to lose some of the still moments of life that allow us to connect with one another. This also stems from a lack of focus and it is something that we can already see our society struggling with. Another important claim that Boers make is, “Less and less do we find that there are interests or activities or priorities that binds us and build us up together” (Boers 17). Boers is suggesting that our hurried culture is disallowing time for us to truly come together and really connect. It seems rather ironic, for all the claims that social media makes about how it brings people together, that it’s making people less connected than ever. Boers discusses how much of a community’s life came from people needing to come together to gather a commonly needed resource. He talks about how in many stories in the Bible take place centered around a well. Since everyone needs water, a well becomes a natural meeting place. During their encounters here, people find out their common interests and what they disagree on. They fight and come to agreements here, which deepens their connects with the people around them and makes their community stronger. As our technological advances allow for less communal reliance on a single resource such as well, it is important that we still find ways to connect with members of our community in a similar way.

Boers describes how most people recognize that they are living a life where they do not feel fulfilled which comes largely from a decrease in focus in our lives. We hurry along from one thing to another, despite not quite knowing why we do it other than “it’s what everyone is doing”. So why do people keep choosing to live like this? I believe that many people continue with their dissatisfied, unfulfilled lives largely due to how algorithms and other forms of technology have shaped their values, often without them realizing it. Despite the thousands of hours and millions of dollars that are spent creating the “perfect” algorithm that will bring people

of similar interests together, it still doesn't perform nearly as well as local gathering places that were used hundreds or thousands of years ago. Since we have so little control of the content that algorithms chose for us to see online, we may find ourselves embedded in an online community that doesn't hold the same values that we do and be unsure of how to find our way out of the community. If we were still gathering at the well and came across someone with behavior and values that didn't align with our own, we could just walk away and not constantly be forced to listen to what they have to say. An example of how this might affect our lives is that we might start placing a higher value on doing "cool" activities to show off to our followers that we wouldn't ordinarily do. This might come at a deep cost. Maybe we work more hours to afford these things which requires spending more time away from the family. If it weren't for the algorithms, we wouldn't even consider doing the thing that ends up putting a strain on our family, but the algorithms have influenced our values, changed our thinking, and along the way damaged our relationships.

Christian theology views friendship and human relationships as something that fulfills us. The importance of friendship and good relationships in a human's life cannot be overstated. Christian theologian Wadell discusses how friendship is part of human happiness and fulfillment. He emphasizes that we need to connect with others for a good life. Wadell makes a very powerful comment on human relationships when he states "Friends and communities are indispensable elements to the moral life because the best and most enduring friendships, the strongest and healthiest communities, provide the very form of life necessary for growing in goodness and acquiring happiness" (Wadell 34). This emphasizes our need for strong relationships. They help us, more than anything, in our quest for fulfillment and true happiness. Implementing practices into our daily lives to help us form the character traits needed to build

strong friendships is one of the most helpful things that we can do for our own fulfillment. These strong friendships eventually create strong communities where everyone can be the best version of themselves and everyone is better off.

Christian theology says that curating deep relationships with one another is one of the best things that we can do for our fulfillment as a human being. This begs the question, how do the algorithms implemented in today's technology impact our relationships with one another? Most people have come to some realization about how their devices are disturbing their wellbeing but continue to use these apps and devices without any changes. Cal Newport is a computer science professor at Georgetown who has written many books on the intersection of digital technology and culture. He discusses how modern technology is shifting how we interact with others. He makes a compelling argument as to how technology is affecting our relationship. He says the worst damage that technology has done is that it has taken away our alone time. With the world at our fingertips, we no longer have times where we just sit and are alone with our thoughts. There is always a distraction available. Unfortunately, this practice wreaks havoc in our lives. Newport states, "When an entire cohort unintentionally eliminated alone time with their thoughts from their lives, their mental health suffered dramatically... These teenagers have lost the ability to process and make sense of their emotions, to reflect on who they are and what really matters, or to build strong relationships" (Newport 108). Newport argues that this quiet, alone time in our lives is something that makes us better people and more apt to deal with the situations around us. When we are unable to deal with our emotions and what's happening around us, it damages our own mental health which eventually starts to harm our relationships.

Wadell's argument that we need friends and community to grow in goodness and happiness is starkly contrasted with Newport's idea of how, despite many algorithms being built

to create connections, they are deeply damaging our relationships with each other and ourselves. As much as modern technology and the algorithms behind modern technology claim to bring people together, why is it that they seem to be doing the exact opposite of what Christian thinkers argue what humans need for good relationships? Algorithms may bring people together, but they often do not bring people together in the authentic way that Christian theologians would argue is necessary for human fulfillment. Many social networking application's algorithms try to figure out who you may know, who you may share interests with, or who you would be interested in knowing. While these connections may otherwise not be available without the algorithm, they rarely lead to an enduring friendship or a healthy community. Frequently, this type of connection made possible from an algorithm leaves us with a temporary feeling of satisfaction of the friendship or community that we have built upon, but these are flimsy foundations for a strong, meaningful relationship at best. The inability to create the meaningful relationships that are so vital to our fulfillment is largely due to how much more we can choose which parts of ourselves we would like to display online. Since conversations are not happening in real time, many of the true reactions that we would have in a regular face to face conversation are missed. Those real time reactions are vital to building an enduring friendship.

Wadell also argues that a needed vital component of a meaningful friendship is trust. We need to trust that our friends will be there for us when we need them, not share the secrets that we tell them, and tell us the truth. Wadell deepens his argument about trust when he claims that we also need to trust that our friends will keep our values and best interests in mind and tell us when we need to change. He says, "This takes courage, and it only works where trust is strong, but it is an essential element of benevolence and beneficence because we cannot want the best for our friends if we stand by and say nothing when we see them developing habits that will only

hurt them” (Wadell 23). In at least one point in our lives, we inevitably make decisions that do not line up with the values we claim to adhere our life to. These could start off as poor daily practices, but if left unchecked could turn into character traits. We need friends that understand our values and have similar values to our own to steer us off these poor paths that we may choose to take in life. These friends truly care about who we are and have our best interests at heart. Most importantly, friends that can call you out on your poor behavior allow you to be a better friend. If they start seeing daily practices in your life that will not allow you to live a life that you don’t consider to contribute to a good human life, they will help correct you before they become habits and character traits.

As Wadell discussed that we need to trust that our friends will help guide us on a path that is right for us, we also should be able to trust that we can trust the algorithms that shape so many different aspects of our lives. We often interact with algorithms more than we do our friends. In his 2020 book *The Data Detective* author Tim Harford emphasizes just how much algorithms are used in our daily lives when he states, “Algorithms and large datasets are being used for everything from finding us love to deciding whether, if we are accused of a crime, we go to prison before the trial or instead are allowed to post bail” (Harford 158). When a single entity can touch this many different aspects of your life, it is important to understand why and how decisions are being made on your behalf. While every algorithm may be different and focused on doing different things (some “safer” than others), I think that it’s a little frightening to entrust so much of your life to a single thing that we know quite little about how it works or why it makes the decisions that it does. Since top secret algorithms is the way that most tech companies make their money, companies do not want to share their algorithms. This can leave the user completely in the dark about how their online experience is shaped. While not



understanding how an algorithm works may not seem concerning (we don't understand a lot of things in our world), considering how easily Menuz, Hurlimann, and Godard argued that we are influenced, I think that is something to be concerned about.

In our modern world we have left algorithms to make many of our decisions for us. They decide the Facebook groups that we see, the people who pop up on our timelines, and the routes we take to new places. While I doubt that anyone would look at any algorithm and say, "that algorithm is my friend!", I think that it's important to bring in Wadell's idea of trust in friendships to our relationship with algorithms since they end up making so many decisions in our lives. Most algorithms are built to create more revenue for corporations or with some other end goal not considering the well being and values of the user. I believe that this comes at a huge cost to the user. When we are largely not the ones making the decisions in our lives and the thing making decisions in our life is not a friend who cares about our values and our goals, it can be very damaging to ourselves and our relationships. Over time, these algorithms start to influence the decisions and choices that we make. Maybe your Instagram algorithm sends you a notification when someone you follow posts (despite that you never asked for a notification when this person posted), and you check the post instead of holding the conversation with your friend. This may not seem like a huge issue in the moment, but as this becomes a regular practice in your life, it starts to negatively impact your relationships. Maybe you consider one of your values to be a good listener, but every time your friend talks to you, you end up checking your phone since an algorithm decided that you needed to be notified of something. Over time, this practice induced by an algorithm that does not care about your wellbeing as a human neither do you trust that it does, becomes very damaging to your relationship with others.

Many Christian theologians argue that human relationships are one of the most important aspects of a good Christian life and to our own fulfillment. As algorithms have become so widespread in our daily lives, they are shaping our relationships with others. Unfortunately, these algorithms are not nurturing our relationships in the way that Christian theology argues that we need. Modern algorithms have hurried our pace of life, decreased the quality of our interactions and connections, harmed our ability to process emotions, and damaged trust in our relationships. As much as someone may want Christian morals and values to fulfill their lives and relationships, it is easy to lose focus of these largely due to the amount of influence others are seeking over our lives through algorithms. We cannot completely avoid algorithms, but we can reflect on how algorithms are influencing our practices and values and make changes to how we interact with these algorithms as we see fit.

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