

## CHAIN OF THOUGHT

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The most poignant moment in the congressional hearings ten days ago concerning online child safety came when Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's chief executive, interrupted a blistering interrogation by Republican Sen. Josh Hawley. Zuckerberg stood up to address the parents of online child sexual exploitation victims who had gathered for the hearing. "I'm sorry for everything you have all been through," Zuckerberg said. "No one should go through the things that your families have suffered."

Last year, online platforms reported 45 million images and videos of child sexual abuse, up from 1 million reported ten years ago. Advances in encryption and image processing, along with shortcomings in monitoring and enforcement, have exacerbated the problem, which will continue to grow exponentially.

The problem of exploitive images isn't limited to children. The circulation several weeks ago of pornographic images of Taylor Swift created a firestorm of protest, in part because of Swift's high-profile relationship with Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce. As one wag put it, the couple represent the two remaining institutions that Americans across the political spectrum still believe in: Taylor Swift and the NFL.

Within hours of the pornographic images of Swift appearing online, the host platform blocked searches on her name and took down the images — a rapid response that's virtually unprecedented. Most of the time, it takes online platforms weeks if not months to respond — if they ever do. While the images of Swift were apparently recognizably her, they were reportedly of sufficiently poor quality that a viewer could tell they weren't actually Swift. As one analyst noted, the time will come when even experts won't be able to tell the difference — whether the image is real or whether it's fake.

Given the ongoing advances in artificial intelligence, this problem will clearly get a whole lot worse. In the December issue of *Noema* magazine, Editor-in-Chief Nathan Gardels asked former Google CEO Eric Schmidt where he would draw the lines to stop AI. Schmidt responded that the time will come when computer systems will be able to act on their own. He says, "In the scenario where such a system can send and receive emails, where it has access to large amounts of money, and where it has access to specialized labs or even dangerous weapons, we will have to restrict and regulate these. It is possible that in a distant future these capabilities will be so dangerous that the government could actually ban further development and require such development in a national lab under military secrecy."

Schmidt goes on to say that companies are beginning to invent some of these more potentially dangerous capabilities, which are currently based on an ability known

as “chain of thought” reasoning. He concludes, “When the system can decide its own questions and what to work on, we will need guarantees of red lines that the system cannot cross regardless of use... The maximally intelligent systems will have to be fully limited in what they can do.”

We are used to thinking of chain-of-thought reasoning as the process of observation and deduction that, over the course of human history, has led from ignorance to enlightenment. On these terms, our reliance on reason is the signal triumph of human evolution, the tool we have used to shift the source of our most certain knowledge from an unknown and unknowable deity in the sky to our experience here on earth. Our use of reason has produced astonishing results — a profusion of well-being and prosperity that our human forebears would find hard to imagine.

What Schmidt warns, however, is that chain-of-thought reasoning can also shackle us to a dystopian future. When the systems we create eventually become self-sufficient and then self-serving, the consequences for human well-being and prosperity will be devastating.

In the meantime, we are faced with a crisis of distinguishing what is real from what is falsely represented as real — real news versus fake news, for example, and real images versus fake images. The consequences for human well-being, not to mention democracy itself, hangs in the balance.

Half a century ago, the original Star Trek series visualized the idea that the human body, once digitally mapped, can suddenly appear elsewhere. The series featured a machine known as a teleporter, which enabled people to move instantly from one location to another, even from one galaxy to another. The teleporter scanned the body, mapped the location of all its atoms, then broke down the body into a form of energy known as a matter stream. After the energy was safely stored in what was called a pattern buffer, the transporter used an emitter array to send the matter stream to a new location, where it was reconstituted into the original body.

In this scenario, what showed up in the new location was the real person — not an image of the person or a replica of the person. It was the living, breathing person, who then existed in no other place and no other way.

While there are some superficial similarities between teleporting and our use of digital images today, there are also some profound differences. A pornographic image of Taylor Swift isn't actually Taylor Swift, nor is it an image of the actual Taylor Swift. But what about, say, a digital image of Galen Guengerich that shows up on Zoom at 10 AM on a Wednesday morning? The image is not actually Galen Guengerich, but it is an image of the actual Galen Guengerich. This difference — between an actual person and an image of a person — constitutes one of the great spiritual challenges of our time.

Our increasing reliance on interactions among our digital selves has come to dominate our lives and our culture. This capability has become extraordinarily useful, especially in recent years during the COVID crisis, but it has also decreased our

inclination to show up in person. This lack of actual face-to-face interaction has become a spiritual cataclysm.

Former New York Times movie critic A.O. Scott sounded the alarm in an article several months ago about the decline in moviegoing and the rise in binge watching on streaming services. He says, “This minor alteration of consumer habit has turned out to be a major cultural disaster — not the death of movies so much as the eclipse of their shared meaning.” While streaming platforms aggregate viewers for commercial reasons, the viewers themselves remain isolated from each other.

David Brooks expands the arena of isolation in one of his recent columns in the New York Times. He says, “Surveys show that Americans are abandoning cultural institutions. Since the early 2000s, fewer and fewer people say that they visit art museums and galleries, go to see plays or attend classical music concerts, opera or ballet.” He continues, “I’d argue that we have become so sad, lonely, angry and mean as a society in part because so many people have not been taught or don’t bother practicing to enter sympathetically into the minds of their fellow human beings. We’re overpoliticized while growing increasingly undermoralized, underspiritualized, undercultured.”

For my part, I believe the challenge of entering sympathetically into the minds and hearts of other people stands at the very heart of our mission as a religious community. To do so, we need to be present to each other — really, fully, and truly.

The difference between a real person and a representation of a person isn’t a trivial difference. Indeed, it’s a difference that has been one of the greatest sources of violence in Western history.

At the gathering known in the Christian tradition as the Last Supper, Jesus gave bread and wine to his disciples and said to them, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” What exactly Jesus meant by those words fomented a longstanding doctrinal battle within the Christian tradition, one that led to some of religion’s bloodiest wars. Put in simple and perhaps reductionist terms, Catholics take these phrases literally and Protestants do not.

For Catholics, the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ, which is why the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is a means of grace for those who believe. (In case you’re concerned, there are convoluted theological explanations as to why the bread and wine don’t look like flesh and blood.) Protestants, on the other hand, believe that the elements symbolize the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and belief in the saving power of Jesus’ death is the means of grace. For Catholics, Christ is really present in the Eucharist; while for Protestants, the presence is metaphorical or symbolic.

When it comes to the Eucharist, I disagree with the Catholic position. I believe in mystery, but not in magic. Nonetheless, the idea of real presence helps explain why I believe our increasing reliance on digital interactions, even when they are positive and constructive, will ultimately fail to satisfy the human hunger for significance, meaning, and community.

Make no mistake: digital tools produced by chain-of-thought reasoning have made our lives better in many ways. We stay connected with loved ones, friends, and colleagues when distance separates us. We gather when we are apart. We enjoy movies, concerts, and museums when we are unable to show up in person. But as long as we are flesh and blood, we need also to practice real presence — actually showing up as our actual selves.

We also need to work together to counter the dangers and devastations that have resulted from perverse and malicious use of digital technologies. The suffering they have created is pervasive and profound, and the long-term risks to a human and humane future remain ever more daunting. By practicing real presence, we can stay attuned to our full humanity and remain vigilant to the threats that would destroy it.

Worship, in my view, is an analog experience in a digital world. Welcome to the real world. The people around you today have not been digitally degraded or enhanced. They all have unfulfilled longings and unrealized dreams, just as you do. Many of them have aches in their bodies and sorrows in their souls. Sometimes they are strong and resilient, and at other times fragile and uncertain. None of them is perfect, not in any way. Together, we seek consolation and comfort.

Our purpose here is not to escape what is real, but to voice earnest outrage at the wickedness in our world, at the self-righteousness in our midst, and at the self-satisfaction in our hearts. We can imagine something better, and we resolve to make it so. We feast our eyes on the simple beauty of this sacred place to make us indignant at ugliness and treachery. We open our ears to sublime music to make us impatient with discord and despair. We fill our minds with things that are good and true to make us wary of false hopes and false prophets. We wait for the spirit of God — not magically to transform us, but mysteriously to move us. This is not an experience we can purchase or program.

Worship keeps us in touch with what is true because it is real — the truth about ourselves and about our world. Worship is also religious practice. It's where we learn how to wait and listen, how to be truthful and faithful. It's where we learn to be present — to ourselves, to each other, and to the God who holds us all in a divine embrace.