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## Review

### **Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy and Education:**

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*Review by Dr Wessel Wessels<sup>1</sup>*

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is intrinsic to the reality of our contemporary, globalised world. However, sufficient engagement with the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its implications, both in current form and the possible consequences for the future, has thus far been insufficient. In *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, edited by Prof Jan-Albert van den Berg, pioneering work regarding engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution takes place in theology, philosophy, and education.

*Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution* should be seen as a first engagement with the technologies and implications of the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. One can approach *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution* with only a vague understanding, or no understanding whatsoever, of what the Fourth Industrial Revolution entails and be guided towards both greater understanding and critical contemplation on the theme. In most of the chapters, a comprehensive definition of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is presented. Quoting from Louis Fourie's chapter: "[The Fourth Industrial Revolution] entails a new generation of sophisticated and game-changing technologies [...] such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, cloud technology, smart robotics, the internet of things, and big data [...] that are transforming the world into a highly connected and intelligent place" (12). Even though I am aware of the term Fourth Industrial Revolution and have a decent comprehension of the technologies it comprises, it was only in the

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reading of *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution* that a more significant awareness was developed.

Jan-Albert van den Berg states the goal of the book as follows: “The conversation with technology, and with thinkers on technology, holds the promise of a certain fecundity, the possibility to see deeper into human evolution, but also, maybe, into the future of humankind” (10). On the one hand, this fecundity of technology holds the imagined potential for the complete well-being of human beings. A type of utopia where human existence is re-imagined as eliminating “the need to work, where all humans share in the profusion of resources, and technology solves all problems” (31). On the other hand, a dystopia where privacy becomes void, and our worth is defined by others (56).

To my mind, Rian Venter most vividly articulates the two polarising postures when interacting with the Fourth Industrial Revolution. On the one hand, the embrace of technology towards a theology of technology which “intentionally [...] explore creative postures that suit the sophistication of present technological advances” (74). On the other hand, the resistance to “the dark side of a new axial age” (75). In this instance, theology would take the role of prophetic voice against the underlying systems and potential impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Indeed, a third option can be to cultivate a theology that can both embrace and resist as contextual realities and issues arise.

With regards to such issues, *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution* contemplates a myriad of important implications of technology for ontology and theological anthropology: The Imago Dei and being human (23,29,109,132), eschatology (32), ministerial training (171), religious competencies (187-204), and virtual rituals (209-231). However, as Johan Rossouw showcases, the Fourth Industrial Revolution may be a farfetched notion for the South African context with a failing education system, corrupt management in technical parastatals, and the persistent lack of maintenance of city infrastructure (91-92). Thus, as attractive as the implications of technology may be for the community’s well-being, such possibilities are merely a pipe dream in a context where the minimum requirements for technological participation are not being met.

Looking towards the future and further (especially theological) engagement with the Fourth Industrial Revolution, I would expect greater contemplation on the agendas behind the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As was showcased in the Netflix film, *The Social Dilemma*, technology is not sterile and without human interests. Instead, the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are laden with the particularity of interest and perspective. Future engagement with these technologies must contemplate the power dynamics at work within the default usage of these technologies. Who's interests are advanced? Who holds the power of influence in these technologies? What are the economic, social, and political implications? And how can these technologies be reapplied to the advancement of the subaltern – if at all?

Furthermore, because *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution* came into existence before the Covid19 pandemic, there is the necessity for contemplating how government-mandated isolation has exacerbated the relationship between being human and virtual existence. On the one hand, research must be conducted on what has happened, how people's lives and well-being has been affected, and whether virtual existence has become paramount. On the other hand, thorough critical engagement should take place on the implications of Covid19, especially in the South African context (and that of Africa as a whole) where the minimum requirements for virtual life are mostly inaccessible.