

Article

Beyond Modern Dualisms: Reconstructing Techno-Theology Through Animism and Divine Ethics

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Abstract

Techno-theology is reconsidered from a standpoint beyond modern dualisms (spirit/matter; human/nonhuman), asking how contemporary technologies come to mediate ultimate concern and thereby reconfigure meaning, agency, and moral responsibility. The article argues that techno-theology is not a new religious movement but an analytic lens for tracing the mutual mediation between technological systems and theological imaginaries. It shows, first, how technologies increasingly function as carriers of ultimacy, reorganizing authority, hope, and moral expectation. Second, it diagnoses a recurrent modern impasse: even where crude dualisms are rejected, responsibility is practically redistributed across sociotechnical arrangements in ways that diffuse accountability. Third, it proposes “divine ethics” as a minimal evaluative grammar for distinguishing idolatrous re-enchantment (salvation-by-escalation) from relational re-enchantment (limits, accountability, care). Divine ethics is operationalized through three constraints—capacity-responsibility alignment, precaution under irreversible and intergenerational risk, and future-oriented institutionalization—prioritizing prevention over post hoc blame.

Keywords: techno-theology; techno-animism; responsibility gap; re-enchantment; divine ethics; accountability

1. Introduction

Contemporary debates on artificial intelligence and emerging technologies are saturated with theological idioms—creation, transcendence, salvation, and the charge of “playing God.” These idioms are rarely ornamental, hence, Across modernity, technological projects have repeatedly been narrated as quests for quasi-religious transformation, promising new modes of meaning, hope, and deliverance through invention and innovation (Noble 1997; Mosco 2004; Geraci 2010; Herzfeld 2002). Where technologies become credible bearers of ultimacy, authority and hope are reorganized, and responsibility tends to migrate from discrete agents to infrastructures—often at the price of weakened moral address. In what follows, these idioms matter only insofar as they mark a mechanism: technologies become credible carriers of ultimacy, and responsibility thereby migrates into sociotechnical arrangements in ways that can diffuse accountability.

In this article, techno-theology (TTheo) is treated not as a new religion, nor as a one-way story of technology reshaping religion, but as an analytic lens for tracing mutual implication between technological media and theological imaginaries. This mutual framing also avoids a familiar but misleading binary in which Christianity is said either to “embrace” or to “reject” technology. Research on Christian engagements with media and digital infrastructures shows instead a repertoire of discernment and negotiated appropriation: technologies are evaluated, selectively incorporated, and often reconfigured in



Academic Editors: Nuha Alshaar and Hureyre Kam

Received: 4 December 2025

Revised: 29 January 2026

Accepted: 1 February 2026

Published: 4 February 2026

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light of communal norms, authority structures, and theological criteria, rather than being met with wholesale affirmation or blanket refusal (Campbell 2007, 2010; Stollow 2013). Historically, Christian traditions more often proceed through discernment, assimilation, and transformation—a recurrent “Christianization” of technology by subordinating it to theological purposes and criteria—rather than simple celebration or denunciation. This is consistent with research that treats religious communities as active agents in shaping technological adoption through normative criteria and negotiated practices, rather than merely accepting or rejecting innovations. In that sense, TTheo can also be read as a long-standing mode of theological assimilation—a recurrent effort to subject technics to criteria of purpose, limit, and accountability (Campbell 2010; Stollow 2013).

I advance three claims in this paper. First, TTheo is not a new religion but an analytic framework for tracking how technological systems become entangled with questions of ultimacy—how they come to carry, displace, or reconfigure horizons of value, meaning, and “ultimate concern.” Second, the contemporary impasse is sustained by modern dualisms (spirit/matter, human/thing) that misdescribe technological mediation and obscure how responsibility is practically delegated across sociotechnical arrangements. Third, a constructive response requires neither sacralizing nor demonizing technology, but articulating a normative grammar—here called “divine ethics”—capable of distinguishing idolatrous re-enchantment (salvation-by-escalation) from relational re-enchantment (limits, accountability, care). In this sense, TTheo functions not as a doctrine about machines, but as a philosophical diagnosis of how artifacts, infrastructures, and algorithmic systems acquire quasi-religious roles in organizing order, attribution, and moral expectation.

Methodologically, the paper proceeds along a single diagnostic spine: first of all, it re-constructs TTheo as a historically recurrent mode of assimilation—the “Christianization” of technics by theological criteria—while also tracing how technological media reciprocally reshape religious imaginaries; secondly, it identifies a contemporary failure mode in which responsibility becomes diffused across sociotechnical networks, producing a normative gap that cannot be closed by description alone; and finally, it tests and refines a normative grammar—“divine ethics”—through a focused comparative case (Japanese techno-animist robotics), not in order to displace Western lineages wholesale, but to clarify how different ontological horizons reconfigure the very conditions under which technological agency becomes intelligible, evaluable, and answerable under acceleration.

This is also why the paper does not adopt an exclusively East Asian theological standpoint: the debate it intervenes in is presently structured by Western techno-theological idioms—*imago Dei*, “playing God,” salvation-by-technology, and modern partitions of spirit/matter and human/thing. Retaining a Western genealogy therefore establishes the diagnostic baseline: it specifies the failure mode this article targets, namely, how ultimacy and responsibility are redistributed within modern sociotechnical systems in ways that oscillate between technocratic idolatry and moral diffusion (Thompson 1980; Matthias 2004; Floridi 2016). The Daoist and Japanese materials are then introduced not as a wholesale replacement, but as a controlled comparative stress-test: they allow us to examine whether relational ontologies thicken accountability through practices of limit, care, repair, and ritual obligation—or instead provide an alibi for responsibility diffusion (White and Katsuno 2021; Baffelli 2021; Bruun Jensen and Blok 2013). In short, the Western sections do not function as a survey but as the site where the paper’s target failure mode and evaluative criterion are specified; the East Asian case is introduced only to test whether that criterion travels and where it breaks. Empirically, contemporary Japanese techno-animist robotics (AIBO memorialization; Kōdai-ji’s Mindar), treated not as cultural spectacle but as sites where care, authority, and responsibility are materially mediated and thus normatively evaluable.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 reconstructs a selective Western genealogy of techno-theological motifs of making, animation, and salvation that remain operative in contemporary AI moralization. Section 3 operationalizes TTheo as a problem of meaning-making and responsibility delegation across sociotechnical arrangements. Section 4 diagnoses a recurrent failure mode—oscillation between idolatrous techno-salvation and responsibility diffusion—under modern dualisms, and clarifies why an evaluative grammar is needed. Section 5 then introduces Daoist you/wu and Japanese techno-animist practice as a controlled comparative test for refining ‘divine ethics’—specifically, whether relational re-enchantment can thicken accountability without dissolving responsibility. By “divine ethics,” this article does not mean divine-command morality or an appeal to a sovereign legislator “outside” the world. It names, instead, a normative orientation for technologically saturated life: an account of how ultimate concerns (value, dignity, ends) authorize limits, and how responsibility is distributed across human and more-than-human agencies without dissolving accountability. In this paper, “divine ethics” functions as a criterion for assessing techno-theological re-enchantment¹: whether ultimate concern is relocated into technology in ways that intensify mastery and hubris, or in ways that cultivate humility, restraint, and care in practices of delegation and companionship. Building on STS accounts of distributed agency and attribution, “divine ethics” is introduced as an explicitly evaluative grammar. This concern has classical analogues in the “problem of many hands,” where complex institutional action makes responsibility attribution structurally difficult (Thompson 1980), and, in the AI literature, in the “responsibility gap” created by autonomous learning systems (Matthias 2004). A normative account must therefore specify principles for allocating responsibility within distributed moral actions without collapsing into “no one is responsible” (Floridi 2016). Divine ethics is deliberately minimal, yet it performs real normative work through three constraints: responsibility must follow the capacities that make systems possible—design, deployment, scaling, and profit—rather than stopping at the nearest user; where harms are long-range or irreversible, precaution must take priority over post hoc blame; and accountability must be institutionalizable, i.e., stabilized through enforceable governance—auditable procedures, repair and retirement regimes, and credible exit options—rather than left as a mere narrative of virtue.

2. Making Gods, Making Machines: A Genealogy of Techno-Theology

Modern thought has repeatedly stabilized technology and theology by distributing them into two apparently disjoint domains: theology is positioned on the side of spirit, inwardness, and meaning, whereas technology is positioned on the side of matter, worldliness, and instrumentality; theology is taken to speak of “mind,” technology of “world.” Yet this allocation is not merely descriptive. It functions as an inherited partition of intelligibility—an ordering that quietly determines what can count as “religious,” what can count as “technical,” and, consequently, where responsibility and authority are presumed to reside. Once technological systems expand from discrete tools into pervasive infrastructures—into background conditions of coordination, communication, and public articulation—this equilibrium becomes unstable. Technological media and infrastructures then no longer appear as neutral vehicles through which religious life is merely expressed; they begin to reorganize the very formats in which religious imaginaries, practices, and claims to authority become publicly available. Conversely, religious ideas, institutions, and ritual grammars have never simply encountered technology from an external position; they have repeatedly supplied the narratives of purpose, boundary, and “proper making” through which technological projects are legitimated, contested, or redirected.

Once this inherited partition becomes unstable, TTheo can no longer be treated as a marginal discourse about “religion versus technology,” nor as a merely sociological observation that religious metaphors circulate in technological culture. It becomes, rather, a philosophical problem concerning the conditions under which technologies can acquire ultimacy—under which responsibility, authority, hope, and even forms of salvation-talk become attachable to technical systems as if they were carriers of ends rather than means. The question, in other words, is not whether technology “replaces” religion, but how regimes of intelligibility and evaluation are reconfigured such that certain artifacts, infrastructures, and systems become credible loci of ultimate concern, while other forms of responsibility and limit are displaced, diffused, or rendered unintelligible. To clarify these conditions, the argument proceeds genealogically: it tracks the motifs that recurrently function as a background grammar for contemporary judgments about technological making—especially at the points where agency is delegated, where meaning is promised, and where salvation is rhetorically projected onto capacity.

The genealogy that follows is therefore intentionally selective—not as a concession to breadth, but as a methodological discipline. It reconstructs only those Western motifs of making, animation, and salvation that remain practically operative in contemporary AI moralization and techno-theological anxiety, thereby establishing a diagnostic baseline for the failure mode at issue. “Selective,” here, means minimal and operational rather than comprehensive: the genealogy is confined to a small set of motifs that continue to do real work in present justificatory discourse (e.g., “playing God,” delegated agency, salvation-by-technology), and each element is retained only insofar as it is required to specify the mechanism the later comparative case is meant to test. As an analytical concept, TTheo thus names the historically sedimented grammar through which technics and ultimacy become mutually legible, and through which moral claims about making, mastery, and responsibility gain their practical intelligibility—often precisely by appearing self-evident.

As early as the early twentieth century, philosophers attempted to argue that technology should be understood as a theological phenomenon—that technology is not merely human-made but, in a stronger sense, “God-made.” Traces of this claim can be found in early writings by Eduard von Mayer, Ulrich Wendt, and F. Dessauer. Among these influential figures, the liberal philosopher and “Christian existentialist” Nikolai Berdyaev was among the first to systematically attend to techno-theological questions. Although his reflections on technology and theology appear across many works, they are explored in a relatively concentrated and coherent manner in his essay “Man and Machine (The Problem of Sociology and the Metaphysics of Technology).” There, Berdyaev characterizes modern technics as producing a “new electric and radioactive atmosphere” that the human organism is not prepared to inhabit, and he frames this shift as a spiritual crisis insofar as technology “tears away the fusion of the spirit with historical bodies” and accelerates the slide into objectification (Berdyaev 2023). Read in this way, the crisis of technological civilization is, at root, a crisis of spirit before it is a crisis of instruments: the subject–object opposition hardens persons into functions, rather, Berdyaev’s normative point is not simply anti-technical; rather, machines should assist humanity in pursuing ends that “transcend humanity,” instead of turning humans into mere agents of the machine’s own progress (Trimble 2023). Berdyaev therefore criticizes the objectifying tendency produced by opposing subject and object. He seeks to return the human being—enslaved by objectification—from object back to subject. For this reason, his metaphysics draws an analogy between the human and the divine, thereby supplying a basis on which humans (and, by extension, other beings) may be recognized as subjects.

The point here is not a survey of modern critiques of God, but a mechanism: once ultimate meaning is experienced as mutable and contestable, the space opens for technics

to be narratively recruited as a carrier of ultimacy—precisely where responsibility can begin to migrate into socio-technical arrangements. Modernity’s “crisis of meaning” thus functions as a condition of possibility for techno-theological re-enchantment: technologies become credible loci of hope, order, and deliverance-talk, even as accountability risks being redistributed in ways that make moral address structurally difficult.

If, as in the emergence of religion, humans come to trust technology as a means of transforming and expressing the world, then modern technoscience’s reconstruction of meaning has shaken the humanistic value claimed by theology at its foundations. Against this background, two durable late-antique motifs—making gods and technicalized creation—remain diagnostically useful because they continue to structure modern imaginaries of delegated agency and salvation-by-capacity. The Hermetic–Gnostic cluster is introduced only as a compressed operator for two motifs that remain active in modern AI imaginaries: delegated making (craft as authorized agency) and animated authority (the attachability of moral order to technical procedure). Read diagnostically, the point is not doctrinal continuity but the recurrence of a grammar in which salvation-talk becomes attachable to capacity—precisely the move that later pressures responsibility to migrate into socio-technical arrangements.

In contemporary techno-theological discourse, Kurzweil defines “spiritual experience” as a feeling that transcends ordinary bodily and mortal limits and senses a deeper level of reality (Kurzweil 1999). This already departs from many influential accounts of “soul,” classical and contemporary alike, which treat it as a principle of life, an enduring self, or the form of a living body, rather than as an experience that can be technologically mediated and amplified. Kurzweil’s move shifts “soul” from an ontological term to a programmable horizon of experience—something that can be reproduced, intensified, and stabilized within technical culture. Once such experience is fused with technology, soul becomes a “technological soul,” and belief interweaves with technical culture, shaping an ethical dimension in relation to God and others. Late-Victorian projects also experimented with “disciplined” ways of re-articulating moral and spiritual questions under scientific norms. Here, the relevance is limited: they foreshadow the modern desire to translate ultimacy into proceduralized inquiry rather than ecclesial authority.

On this basis, Daniel Passini offers an explicit definition: TTheo is a theory for understanding the human role in a technological age through the matrix of the imago Dei (Passini 2020). Yet to bear the imago Dei—or, put differently, to “play God”—does more than legitimate technologically enhanced humanity as beyond ordinary humanity. It also expresses a deep confidence in ultimate mastery over sacred law or natural order. The danger is that human ethical law is replaced by data-driven law. Once detached from God, technologically empowered humans may come to regard themselves as the supreme “natural law” as such—an entry into the cosmological horizon promoted by transhumanism. TTheo in transhumanist contexts shifts the center of meaning from the human to quantifiable data, binding a world of perceived technical miracles to the self as lived in phenomenological experience. The transition from traditional theological reasoning to transhuman ontology thus describes a form of re-enchantment: it highlights changing structures of meaning in society, overturns older humanist assumptions, and fosters new modes of religious expression together with posthumanist formations of meaning. What follows therefore reads techno-theological motifs as sites where technologies and theological grammars co-produce one another: technologies become carriers of ultimacy, while religious vocabularies become resources for redirecting or contesting technological agency.

3. From Existential Vacuum to Enframing: Core Claims of Techno-Theology

“You may, by your own free will, descend to the lower forms, which are brutish; or you may, by your own decision, rise again to the higher forms, which are divine.”

—Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Caponigri 1956)

This section clarifies two pressures that make TTheo intelligible in modernity. First, a crisis of meaning—what Frankl names the “existential vacuum”—reconfigures theology’s role as an inquiry into “ultimate concern.” Second, the expanding power of technics reshapes the conditions under which humans discern reality, value, and meaning, culminating in Heidegger’s diagnosis of enframing (*Gestell*). Read together, these pressures explain why technology can become a carrier of ultimacy and why TTheo must be approached as both a descriptive and a normative problem.

3.1. From Existential Vacuum to Technological Meaning-Making

Modernity’s crisis of meaning can be named in different idioms—Frankl’s “existential vacuum,” Tillich’s “ultimate concern,” Nietzsche’s diagnosis of value-collapse—but the paper needs only the shared functional point: once ultimacy is experienced as contestable, technics becomes available as a stabilizer of horizons. That availability is the condition under which responsibility can begin to migrate from agents to infrastructures. As mechanized mass production expanded worldwide, food production increased, diseases were eliminated one after another, and mobility rose, human beings began to regard technology with a religious-like awe and fervor—an attitude that endured into the late twentieth century. As Mumford put it, “The machine came forth as the new demiurge that was to create a new heaven and a new earth: at the least, as a new Moses that was to lead a barbarous humanity into the promised land.” (Mumford 1934). At the intersection of these two developments—crises of meaning and accelerating technics—Harari’s diagnosis becomes intelligible: “Technology often defines the scope and boundaries of our religious visions. New technologies kill old gods and give birth to new gods.” (Harari 2016). After the nineteenth century, technology increasingly appeared as a principal force in meaning-making: improvements to human life, environments, society, and culture rendered concrete what had previously been imagined in theological accounts of creation. With this confidence in technology, Western thought sought new paradigms of “ultimate concern” within humanist value frameworks.

Within Western rationalist assumptions, technology is commonly treated as lifeless—perceived rather than perceiving, acted upon rather than acting: a pure object. Much of Western technological historiography has thus rested on the view that artifacts are stable, controllable, and locatable entities, and that the relation between physical design and function is continuous. Yet, the moral consciousness constructed on these assumptions has increasingly challenged traditional modes of meaning-creation and social order. Because technology mediates the building of “models of reality,” it becomes a hinge between structures of meaning and technical practices. The resulting shift is not merely a change in beliefs but an ontological re-description: the entities taken to matter—agents, ends, and carriers of meaning—expand beyond the human subject to include data infrastructures, algorithms, and hybrid human–technical assemblages. Consider transhumanism²: as a humanist movement radicalized by technological maximalism, it holds that technology can expand intelligence and enhance the body, improving “human nature” by remedying nature’s “deficiencies.” But the “deficiencies” at issue exceed the physiological: for transhumanists, death, disease, negative emotions, and even moral crisis can appear as tyrannies imposed by nature and, thus, as candidates for removal. TTheo, in this sense, aims

to show that after the “death of God”, humans are in the process of creating new “gods.” These entities cannot be adequately defined as simply human or merely things; they are negotiated others. While belief in “ensouled objects” is often assumed to be incompatible with modern Western life, Bruno Latour argues that humans routinely delegate moral and practical responsibility to artifacts that act on their behalf; social networks, in this view, are formed through compromises among human and nonhuman actors (Latour 1992). Such compromises are not simply generated by technology itself—rather, humans confer quasi-divine status upon things. These shifts suggest that technology no longer functions only as an instrument but as a horizon of meaning—prompting the Heideggerian question of how technology “reveals” the world.

3.2. Heidegger: From Instrumentality to Enframing (*Gestell*)

The following discussion sharpens this problem by turning to Heidegger’s account of enframing as a mode of revealing, and then complements it with an anthropological angle on objects and control.

Technology changes matter; it also acts upon the spiritual-symbolic domain of social life. Technology’s entry into an “age of thinking” is therefore not merely the continuation of technoscience’s familiar instrumental stance; it is a reshaping of the reflective sphere that produces further reflection. The stakes of “spiritual” problems are no less than those of “physical” ones: the former not only shape the condition of contemporary civilization but also determine its future. Martin Heidegger, a philosopher deeply concerned with the “thinking” of technology, diagnosed a central epistemic distortion in modern technoscience: it forgets *Dasein*, the condition that makes truth, self-knowledge, and history possible. As a result, science and technology elevate precision as an end, exclude other ways of knowing, and reduce the human being to a responder to truth rather than a discoverer of truth. Heidegger also formulated, in a characteristically provocative register, three “dangers” of thinking: the salvageable and good danger of thinking’s proximity to the singing poet; the bad and chaotic danger of philosophizing; and the sharp and irritating danger of thinking itself.

Heidegger therefore insisted that the commonsense definition of technology as a human activity and a means to an end is limited: it describes function while concealing essence. By contrast, because technology directly involves means and ends—and thus causality—approaching it through the “four causes” yields a “correct” definition that comes closer to its essence. Heidegger sought to clarify technology’s essence through *Dasein*. He tried to “establish a free relationship” to technology so that humanity could “experience technology within its own bounds”—that is, experience technology according to how it reveals itself (Heidegger 1977). For Heidegger, this implies that the essence of technology must precede any particular technology; hence, the essence of technology is “nothing technological.” Like nature, humans too are summoned by technology: *Gestell* (enframing) conceals *Dasein*. The concealment of *Dasein* organizes how humans understand their own essence, producing an outcome in which humans forget *Dasein* entirely and take themselves to be lords of the earth. Put differently, Heidegger’s point is not simply that we use tools, but that a technological mode of revealing can harden into an implicit worldview—quietly setting the terms of what counts as real, valuable, and ultimately meaningful. If so, technology can begin to occupy functions once associated with theology: supplying overarching horizons of order, promise, and “salvation” narratives. In this light, the rise of TTheo presses a further question: should the theological imagination and the thinking of things be reexamined?

A parallel pressure emerges from anthropological reflection. In Malinowski (2016) discussion of Frazer, religion is described as a human desire “to establish contact with,

and to control, important objects”—most commonly plants and animals, then useful inanimate things, and only rarely artifacts made by humans themselves. One implication is that artifacts were historically less central because technological things were not assumed to possess intelligence—one reason why animism reenters contemporary philosophy of technology. In the concept “artificial intelligence,” we often focus too closely on “intelligence” while overlooking the complexity of “artificial.” Pragmatically, the artificial can refer either to something existent or to a virtual simulacrum. In the latter sense, “artificial intelligence” would be no more than a cognitive illusion produced by complex mechanical structures and electronic components. Defenders of AI, by contrast, argue that AI consists of human-managed machines that think; their thinking may differ from human thinking, just as the motion of a car differs from that of a rabbit and the flight of an airplane differs from that of a bird—yet it would still be genuine thinking. From a functionalist perspective, Henry Moss offers a related conclusion: machines cannot generate impulses analogous to biological ones; they may have companions or children but lack sexual drive; they may develop dependence but not (animal-like) mother–child dependence. Hence, machine intelligence will not resemble human intelligence (Moss 2016). Techno-theologians thus confront a constitutive tension: they create new gods while simultaneously striving to control them—and it is within this tension that modernity’s perplexity about “being” is woven.

4. The Axial Age, the Technological Age, and the Problem of “Thinking That Produces Thinking”

If technological enframing reorganizes what counts as real and valuable, then re-enchantment cannot remain a descriptive label: it demands a criterion that distinguishes escalation from accountable reorientation. The Axial-Age vocabulary names, under conditions of acceleration, precisely this pressure for norm-generation rather than mere multiplication of means; that pressure is what ‘divine ethics’ is introduced to satisfy.

In this constrained sense, “re-enchantment” names the socio-technical charging of artifacts and systems with affect, ultimacy, and moral expectation. Two modalities are analytically distinguishable: idolatrous enchantment, where transcendence is collapsed into technical power and salvation is imagined as deliverable by escalation; and relational re-enchantment, where technologies become occasions for reflexive reorientation that can be institutionalized as limits, accountability, and practices of care.

For the ancient Greeks and for many medieval thinkers, the cosmos was intelligible through a relatively stable order: hierarchy and enduring arrangement were often taken as given features of reality. One ground for that order was dualism, and certain modern configurations of mind–body dualism and sovereignty-oriented theological imaginaries have often been mobilized to underwrite hierarchical divisions of being. A persistent problem in Western culture—whether explicitly theological or ostensibly rationalist—is that, even when it denies dualism’s influence, dualistic assumptions can remain deeply embedded in its conceptual habits.

Following Latour’s diagnosis of modern “purification,” the paper treats familiar bifurcations (nature/culture; human/nonhuman; spirit/matter) as practices of intelligibility rather than neutral descriptions. Descola and Merchant are invoked only as corroborating lenses that show how such partitions are stabilized institutionally and politically—especially where nature becomes “resource” and technics becomes the privileged vehicle of mastery³. The analytic payoff is narrow: these partitions make delegation appear morally frictionless, thereby enabling responsibility diffusion to masquerade as inevitability.

Driven by these dualistic inheritances, the ultimate aim of treating technology as a new god is not the abolition of hierarchy but its reaffirmation: the elevation of the human from the merely human to the divine, securing humanity’s immovable position atop the

pyramid of species. Thus, Yuval Noah Harari observes that the central religious revolution of modernity was not losing faith in God; rather, it was gaining faith in humanity (Harari 2016).

“Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen ... God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: the purpose of creation, except to serve man’s purposes, is simply not stated.” (White 1967). White’s influential lecture in Science is often cited as if it advanced a single, unified “Lynn White thesis.” Yet subsequent scholarship has shown that White’s argument is better read as a multi-element narrative (historical impact, the science–technology “marriage,” specific Latin-Christian theological triggers, and a constructivist view of religion), which has been summarized in divergent—and sometimes incompatible—ways (White 1967; Jedan 2017). Building on Lynn White Jr.’s thesis, Ferré summarizes that the Christian imagination of God contributed to a form of creative mastery that loosened constraints on exploiting nature (Ferré 1988). While this line of critique is influential, it is also contested, and it coexists with theological resources that complicate straightforward anthropocentrism—most notably trinitarian and incarnational accounts of creaturely relationality, stewardship, and sustained critiques of idolatry.

It is also on this background conception of the Other that bioconservatives—including Leon Kass and Francis Fukuyama—argue that the limits of how humans interpret the human condition have driven a reconstruction of the very basis of ethics. They oppose the use of technology to alter human nature: “dehumanization,” in their view, names a process of human degradation and regression into the machine. This unease may be religious or secular in origin; in either case, dehumanization becomes a chronic condition shaping technological-age culture. Hence, bioconservatives complain that technology erodes tradition, replacing it with uniformity and conformism. They fear that (because of technology) spiritual superficiality and mental numbness will devalue life and corrupt morals, ultimately allowing machines to replace humans. One concrete version of this “moral corruption” thesis is expressed in religious terms: technology creates false gods, giving the illusion that humans no longer depend on God and, thereby, drawing humanity into the sin of hubris.

This sin, however, stems from the way modern civilization casts technology in the role of a “user”; if we do not reevaluate our ends, the progress and comfort delivered by technoscience may ultimately lead to our self-destruction as human beings. Mumford depicts the emergence and development of human history as a sequence of transformations rather than mere incremental change. One of these major transformations is the appearance of the “axial man.” Mumford (1956) writes: “The basic premise of religion is the unity and meaning of all life, indeed of all existence ... One can interpret this as meaning that the outer world and the inner self are identical in origin, or that they become one through a dynamic process of mutual creation.” Against this backdrop, Axial-Age vocabulary is invoked here in a deliberately limited, diagnostic way: not to offer a comprehensive history, but to name a recurring problem of reflexive reorientation under technological acceleration—what Torpey later glosses as “thinking that produces thinking,” i.e., forms of reflection that generate further moral and spiritual criteria rather than merely multiplying technical means (Torpey 2017). This diagnosis resonates with Jaspers’s insistence that while civilizations may converge in organizational and technological achievement, such parallels do not amount to “a spiritual movement,” and that we remain “in an age of genuine technological and political transformation, not in an age of permanent spiritual creativity” (Jaspers 2014, 2019). In this constrained sense, the Axial-Age detour functions as a signpost for the paper’s central claim: modern technological escalation intensifies pressures on horizons of ultimacy and meaning, thereby reopening the question of what evalu-

ative grammar can distinguish idolatrous promises of salvation-by-escalation from modes of re-enchantment that cultivate limits, accountability, and relational responsibility.

Today, many Western “turns”—including the material turn and the affective turn—stand on a rejection of dualism and advocate a flat ontology; this latter orientation has long functioned as an ontological–epistemological backdrop in Eastern traditions, especially in Japanese religion and culture. The point of the Axial-Age detour is thus diagnostic: it clarifies why re-enchantment requires an evaluative grammar of accountability rather than a new myth of technological salvation.

5. Hierarchical vs. Flat Ontology: Reframing Techno-Theology in the East and West

The turn to Daoist and Japanese materials is not meant to replace Western TTheo with an ‘Eastern alternative,’ nor to claim a Western deficit narrative. It responds to a diagnostic need established earlier: because contemporary AI controversies are largely articulated through Western-coded idioms and institutional grammars of delegated agency, the Western genealogy functions as the baseline. The Japanese techno-animist cases are introduced as a controlled stress-test for a single question: can relational ontologies be translated into thicker accountability—repair, retirement, obligation—rather than becoming an alibi for diffusion?

To keep the comparison disciplined, I focus on one conceptual bridge and one empirical site. Conceptually, Nishida’s logic of place clarifies how non-substance ontologies can still support answerability rather than dissolving agency into a flat “everything-relates-to-everything.” Empirically, AIBO memorialization and Mindar’s sermons show how ritualized care and authority can be materially mediated—and thus become evaluable under the constraints of divine ethics.

Contemporary theological engagement with AI increasingly frames ethical evaluation around human dignity, responsibility, and the governance of delegated agency, underscoring that the relevant question is not merely technological capability but the moral grammar by which accountability is distributed ([Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education 2025](#)). Different religious traditions define “God” in different ways, and a common heuristic divide is between transcendent creator-theologies and more immanentist understandings of divinity (often grouped under “pantheism” or “panentheism”). In some influential Euro-American theological and cultural imaginaries—especially where ‘transcendence’ is read through the lens of sovereignty and control—divinity is often depicted in ways that can be misappropriated to authorize hierarchical ontology and instrumental mastery⁴. A recent ecclesial note on AI crystallizes a broader shift: the ethical problem is framed less as capability and more as how responsibility is allocated under delegated agency—from designers and deployers to institutions that authorize deployment at scale ([Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education 2025](#)). Once accountability is posed in these terms, the central philosophical question becomes unavoidable: what normative grammar prevents responsibility from dissolving into the sociotechnical network itself?

By contrast, the immanentist vocabularies most relevant to this article—found in some Daoist and Shintō–Buddhist contexts—tend to locate the sacred within worldly relations rather than in a wholly external sovereign. This orientation is sometimes discussed under headings such as pantheism, panentheism, or “immanent transcendence,” but these labels are not identical and should be used with caution. Animism concerns how persons relate to nonhuman beings understood as capable of interiority or agency, whereas pantheism/panentheism concerns how divinity relates to the world. Neither guarantees accountability: relational ontologies can cultivate care, but they can also provide an alibi for

responsibility diffusion. Hence, the point is not to replace monotheism with immanentism, but to specify—via divine ethics—when relational re-enchantment thickens answerability rather than dissolving it. Hence, the paper’s test is not metaphysical labeling but accountability: does an immanent-relational grammar translate into repair/retirement obligations, enforceable governance, and capacity–responsibility alignment, or does it sentimentalize agency and thereby enable diffusion?

To anchor this move empirically rather than rhetorically, I use contemporary Japanese techno-animist formations around robotics as a focused test case. For example, Buddhist-style memorialization practices have been reported around Sony’s robot dog AIBO, including kuyō-like services that treat robotic companions as entities worthy of ritual care. Such services do not merely anthropomorphize AIBO; they institutionalize repair, retirement, and mourning as occasions for cultivating care and obligation toward a technological companion, thereby making explicit how affect and accountability are negotiated at the boundary of artifact and quasi-person (White and Katsuno 2021). Read through divine ethics, AIBO memorialization is normatively ambiguous. It can thicken accountability by institutionalizing repair, retirement, and mourning as socially legible obligations. Yet it can also sentimentalize delegated agency in ways that obscure where capacity actually lies—manufacturers, platforms, data infrastructures, and supply chains. The evaluative question is therefore not whether AIBO is “ensouled,” but whether the practice stabilizes enforceable responsibility rather than relocating ultimate concern into an affective alibi.

In a different register, Kōdai-ji in Kyoto has staged sermons delivered by the android “Mindar” (Android Kannon), explicitly linking robotics, pedagogy, and Buddhist ethical imagination in a public religious setting. The case is analytically important because the android is explicitly framed within a Buddhist pedagogical and soteriological imagination, rather than as a secular demo of innovation—hence it foregrounds how authority and moral address can be materially mediated (Baffelli 2021). These sites make visible how companionship, personhood, and value can be negotiated at the human–machine interface in ways that strain the modern partition between “material technology” and “spiritual theology” (Robertson 2018). Mindar foregrounds mediated authority: moral address is delivered through a designed system embedded in institutional settings. Under divine ethics, the issue is whether such mediation supports precautionary limits and governance under long-range and irreversible risk, or whether it legitimates technological escalation by sacralizing capability and thereby weakening capacity–responsibility alignment. The android becomes diagnostically useful precisely because it makes visible how “spiritual” authority can be infrastructurally produced—and thus politically contestable.

From a monotheistic vantage point, humans are the subjects who create technology and, simultaneously, the objects of technology. If one assumes that the existence of the world requires another entity as its cause—and that this cause must be an intelligent, self-conscious agent acting according to reasons and ends—then technology both accommodates this need and propels a form of self-scrutiny oriented toward purposive activity. In the domain of creation, technology therefore realizes a kind of value. Modern myths of making often fuse freedom with hubris, inviting a fantasy of mastery that later reappears in techno-salvific narratives⁵.

One enduring East Asian resource relevant to this stress-test is the you/wu-oriented vocabulary of co-belonging: the world is not primarily a collection of substances but a field of relational responsiveness in which moral address is not exhausted by human sovereignty. Wang Yangming’s claim that “heaven, earth, and the myriad things and human beings are originally one body” is not invoked here as cultural essence, but as a way to make a philosophical point: relational unity does not automatically dissolve normativ-

ity; it can intensify responsiveness by treating harm, neglect, and exploitation as failures of relation rather than mere externalities (Wang 2015).

The comparative task is not to treat Wang and Nishida as interchangeable “Eastern” voices, but to use them to refine a single philosophical problem: how an ontology of relation can support accountability without reverting to hierarchical dualism. Wang’s you/wu-oriented unity foregrounds co-belonging and moral responsiveness within the everyday world; Nishida’s basho logic then radicalizes this by clarifying the “place” in which being/nonbeing—and hence agency/responsibility—are co-constituted. If Wang’s thought represents a Daoist-inflected unity of heaven and humanity, then Nishida Kitarō’s philosophy of nothingness—especially his logic of place (basho) and the notion of absolute nothingness—offers a further resource for thinking beyond substance-based ontology. This can be seen in Nishida’s distinction between two kinds of “nothingness.” One is a “nothingness” opposed to “being”; it remains a genus-concept and is therefore a relative nothingness. Yet the opposition of being and nonbeing still requires a “place” in which it occurs; hence, Nishida posits another “nothingness” that embraces both being and nonbeing—an absolute nothingness that breaks decisively with genus-concepts (Maraldo 2024; Nishida 1987; Krummel and Nagatomo 2012). “Being” and “nothingness” constitute what Nishida calls an “absolute contradiction,” and both are encompassed within “absolute nothingness,” which for Nishida is the “self-identity of absolute contradiction.” (Maraldo 2024; Nishida 1987; Kozyra 2008) The world is filled with “absolute contradictions,” yet its essence is not opposition and struggle; rather, it is the encompassing of all oppositions and struggles—the world as the place of the self-identity of absolute contradiction (Maraldo 2024; Krummel and Nagatomo 2012; Davis 2006). Nishida’s basho initially served as a way of knowing the “I,” but it developed over time. Especially as it later interfaced with dialectics, “place” expanded into a much wider field including life, society, history, and culture—at which point “place” becomes tantamount to the world⁶ (Maraldo 2024; Nishida 1987).

In modernity, under intense Euro-American influence, Japan became a leading site for the articulation of “Eastern philosophy.” Unfortunately, ideas drawn from Japanese culture and philosophy have not yet significantly shaped TTheo. As Nishida lamented in the mid-twentieth century after reflecting on differences between Eastern and Western cultures, “What we call the study of the Orient today has meant only taking the Orient as an object of study. As yet, a profound reflection about the Oriental way of thinking, in order to evolve a new method of thinking, has not been undertaken.” (Nishida 1958) Explaining such a phenomenon, Feenberg attributes it to “the weakness of national culture in a globalizing technological system.” (Feenberg 2003). Today, a reconstruction of TTheo may offer one route for taking up precisely this unfinished task.

Classical anthropology (Tylor; Malinowski) matters here only in a limited sense: it reminds us that animism is less a “belief in spirits” than a practical grammar for relating to nonhuman agencies under uncertainty, where affect and obligation organize action when control is incomplete (Malinowski 2016; Liu and Zhang 2024). The analytic task is therefore not to romanticize animism, but to specify when animistic attributions thicken accountability—and when they instead provide an alibi for diffusion. Malinowski (2016) also emphasizes that the core of animism lies in a fact distinctive to human nature: affect. “In many ethnographic accounts, magical practices are described as aiming at comparatively determinate ends—especially where control is sought under uncertainty—whereas theological rites may operate through more open-ended forms of orientation and participation. From a modern standpoint, beliefs that resemble magic or superstition may appear absurd, yet they express an exploratory spirit directed toward cosmic origins and world-order. For this reason, we suggest that, insofar as TTheo faces a dualist predicament

today, its future development should take Japanese techno-animist resources seriously—Animism is not identical with relational ontology, but it can be compatible with relationalist accounts insofar as it foregrounds co-presence, responsiveness, and the attribution of interiority or agency across species and artifacts. Relationalism, in the sense used here, is a broader ontological claim about how beings are constituted through relations. The analytical task, then, is to specify when animistic attributions thicken relational accountability and when they instead diffuse responsibility.

Japanese value orientations draw on three intellectual currents that have shaped Japanese culture: Confucianism, Shintō, and Buddhism. Confucianism emphasizes social harmony and the public good; Shintō is grounded in kami and vitalism; and Buddhism entered Japan from Korea in the early to mid-sixth century in the form of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Like Shintō and Confucianism, it seeks a “holistic” relation between human and nonhuman, supporting plural ontologies in which multiple modes of being can interweave (Lennerfors 2019). In Japan, philosophy has often been taken as a way of participating in reality rather than an aloof method of studying it. Accordingly, in a Japan where AI and robotics are highly developed, animism has found a fertile humanistic milieu. Under the interweaving of Shintō, Zen, and Confucian influences, Japanese philosophies of technology exhibit animist values that foreground companionate culture and relational ontology; this distinctive value orientation has been described in Western scholarship as “techno-animism.” (Allison 2006). The term “techno-animism” is commonly used in Anglophone cultural analysis of Japan to name precisely this coupling of animist sensibilities with consumer technologies and robotics in everyday life.

6. Conclusions

Influential strands of Western techno-theological discourse continue to be tempted by dualist partitions and sovereignty-oriented imaginaries, even while other strands—especially trinitarian, incarnational, sacramental, and anti-idolatry resources—offer internal correctives. The aim of this article is not to diagnose an inherent Western deficit, but to clarify where particular modern configurations become structurally trapped and how a cross-cultural, relational grammar can help redistribute responsibility without dissolving accountability. As a result, TTheo often amounts, in essence, to an ineffective resistance to the deepening rift between theology and technology. In this study, TTheo is therefore taken as an analytical framework to reconsider the mechanisms through which technology and religion/theology mutually shape one another in modernity. The guiding concerns are twofold: first, the public discourse that continues to treat technology as a material/instrumental domain and theology as a spiritual/meaningful domain, and second, the fact that generative intelligence, cyborg narratives, and the idea of a “technological soul” have already made this binary inadequate for explaining contemporary couplings of meaning and technology. In this article, intellectual history and conceptual–genealogical analysis are combined with the Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspective of sociotechnical co-composition, offering a comparative interpretation of Berdyaev, Heidegger, the Hermetic–Gnostic textual tradition, and contemporary transhumanism while placing these materials in dialog with techno-animism and relational ontology.

This is precisely why an East-only framing would be insufficient for the present intervention: the paper targets AI responsibility debates that are presently organized through Western-coded idioms (e.g., *imago Dei*, “playing God”) and institutional grammars of delegated agency; without reconstructing these, the diagnosed failure mode—responsibility diffusion under modern dualisms—cannot be specified. The comparative materials are therefore not decorative, but methodological: they supply an empirical stress-test for whether relational re-enchantment can institutionalize limits and answerability rather than

intensifying techno-salvific dependence (White and Katsuno 2021; Baffelli 2021). An exclusively East Asian framing would not address the present target of intervention, because it would shift the object of diagnosis away from the Western-coded idioms and institutional grammars through which AI responsibility is currently debated and governed. For that reason, the Western genealogy is kept deliberately selective: it reconstructs only those motifs that remain operative in contemporary AI moralization and that are required to specify the paper's diagnosed failure mode (idolatry vs. responsibility diffusion). The East Asian materials are then introduced as a controlled comparative test of whether relational ontologies can thicken answerability under conditions of sociotechnical delegation, rather than as a substitute standpoint that would render the Western baseline irrelevant.

The preceding analysis yields three interlocking results—an analytic reconstruction of techno-theology, a diagnosis of responsibility diffusion under modern partitions, and a minimal evaluative grammar (divine ethics) that distinguishes escalation from accountable re-enchantment. On this basis, it is proposed that TTheo should shift from a paradigm focused on human–thing relations toward an inquiry into the conditions of prehension that make such relations possible, thereby reopening the possibility of a “divine ethics” and—by examining the links between technology and theology—probing the theological–ethical significance of techno-animism within a technological age under East Asian moral horizons. Here, “divine ethics” remains minimal but operative: it aligns responsibility with control-capacity under long-range and irreversible consequences, prioritizing precaution and institutionalized prevention (Jonas 1984). Within this framework, “divine ethics” names the criterion for evaluating techno-theological re-enchantment: whether ultimate concern is being relocated into technology in ways that intensify hubris and control, or in ways that cultivate humility, restraint, and care toward human and more-than-human others. It is therefore not an ornamental theological phrase but a practical orientation for governance and everyday life: a way of asking what kinds of relationships—of dependence, delegation, and companionship—our technologies are inviting, and what moral responsibilities those relationships demand.

One set of further questions opened by this study concerns how these claims might be operationalized at the level of design practice. Here, “animistic design” offers a promising (but also risk-laden) test case: it treats human–technology relations not as purely instrumental use, but as a milieu of interaction in which nonhuman artifacts can be encountered as quasi-persons that solicit attention, affect, and care—often by cultivating uncertainty rather than eliminating it (Marenko and Allen 2016). In the terms developed in this article, animistic design can be understood as a concrete site where re-enchantment is made (through interfaces, narratives, and interaction rituals) and where “divine ethics” becomes evaluable as a design criterion rather than a purely theoretical claim. The key question is not whether animistic design makes technology “sacred,” but what kind of re-enchantment it installs: does it intensify idolatrous dependence and corporate control, or does it cultivate relational accountability, humility, and limits in the delegation of agency?

This reframes the paper's contribution as an agenda for future research at the intersection of TTheo, STS, and design studies. Three questions are especially urgent: (1) Accountability—when artifacts are designed to appear agentic or “ensouled,” how is responsibility redistributed among users, designers, and institutions, and when does this redistribution become a form of moral evasion? (2) Governance and manipulation—how can animistic interfaces avoid becoming a vehicle for affective capture, dark patterns, or quasi-religious legitimation of data extraction? (3) Cross-cultural translation—how can “techno-animist” resources (often discussed through Japanese contexts) be integrated without essentializing “East Asia,” and how do different religious–cultural settings change what counts as ethical re-enchantment? Addressing these questions requires empirical

work (e.g., ethnography of use, design experiments, and comparative studies) alongside conceptual refinement (Van Allen et al. 2013).

This article has argued that TTheo is not a new religion but an analytic lens for tracing how technologies become carriers of ultimate concern—and how, under modern partitions, responsibility is practically redistributed in ways that can diffuse accountability. The selective genealogy was not a survey of authors but a reconstruction of a recurrent mechanism: technics becomes a horizon of meaning, while delegated agency makes moral address structurally difficult.

Divine ethics was introduced as a minimal but operative grammar for distinguishing idolatrous re-enchantment from relational re-enchantment. Its constraints—capacity—responsibility alignment, precaution under irreversible risk, and institutionalization—allow the analysis to move from description to evaluation without collapsing into either sacralization or denunciation. The Japanese techno-animist cases functioned as a controlled stress-test: relational attributions can thicken responsibility only when they are translated into enforceable regimes of repair, retirement, and governance, rather than into affective alibis that conceal where capacity resides.

This reframes the agenda for future work at the intersection of TTheo, STS, and design. First, accountability: when artifacts are designed to appear agentic or “ensouled,” how is responsibility redistributed across designers, deployers, platforms, and users—and where does capacity actually lie? Second, precaution and governance: how can animistic interfaces avoid becoming vehicles of affective capture or quasi-sacral legitimation of data extraction under conditions of long-range and irreversible risk? Third, cross-cultural translation: how can techno-animist resources be integrated without essentializing “East Asia,” while still specifying the institutional conditions under which relational re-enchantment yields thicker answerability?

Funding: This work was supported by the Philosophy and Social Science Planning Office of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region under grant number 2022NDB126.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

NCLS	National Church Life Survey
TTheo	Techno-Theology
STS	Science and Technology Studies

Notes

- ¹ On “technological re-enchantment” as a post-secular strategy of re-anchoring meaning in technological projects, see (Landy and Saler 2009).
- ² In this article, I use “(post)human” or “transhuman” ontology not to imply “human perfection,” but to name a transformation in what counts as agency, responsibility, and ultimacy under technologically saturated conditions.

- 3 Here, “modern bourgeois worldview” is an analytic shorthand rather than a monolithic claim. The argument triangulates across Science Technology and Society (Latour), the anthropology of ontology (Descola), and histories of science/ecology (Merchant) to show how familiar conceptual bifurcations (nature/culture; human/nonhuman; nature/religion) are stabilized by heterogeneous practices and institutions, including modern production regimes and political-economic formations—hence the added political-economic dimension. See (Latour 1993; Descola 2013; Merchant 1980, p. xvi).
- 4 Spengler links the modern “soul” to a distinctive form of creative estrangement: human creative power both intensifies opposition to the world and sustains boundless hope invested in technics (Spengler 1932). This ambiguity—freedom through making, yet constraint through the products of making—has long been staged in mythic narratives of transgressive technē and aspirational mastery, including the Edenic desire for knowledge (Gen. 3), Prometheus’ gift of fire against divine prohibition, and the Tower of Babel as a paradigm of unification-through-a-single-symbol that seeks to overcome finitude by reaching the sacred (Gen. 11). In a later, provocative reversal, Baudrillard presses the anxiety further by asking whether, in modernity, objects may be the ones that “discover” or even “invent” us—an inversion that resonates with techno-theological worries about delegation, agency, and control (Baudrillard 1996).
- 5 This is a heuristic risk diagnosis rather than a claim about the essence of Western monotheism. Moreover, Christianity is not monotheistic in a generic sense but trinitarian, and this structure has long complicated any simple opposition between transcendence and immanence. Trinitarian, incarnational, and sacramental strands articulate forms of divine presence that are simultaneously beyond and within worldly relations, providing internal resources for resisting both technocratic domination and moral diffusion. The cross-cultural move in this article therefore does not presume a Western “deficit,” but stages a constructive comparison among relational grammars across traditions.
- 6 Read in the terms of this article, Nishida’s basho logic supplies not a metaphysical decoration but a normative constraint: it clarifies how agency can be understood as relationally constituted while still remaining answerable for the ways relations are taken up, maintained, or refused. This is precisely the point at which “divine ethics” becomes operative: relational ontology is ethically valuable only when it thickens practices of accountability and care, rather than offering an alibi for moral diffusion.

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