

Cybersex, Solipsism, and Paul's Notion of the Body | BY GRENVILLE KENT

I found him whom my soul loveth:

I held him, and would not let him go

—*the woman, Song of Solomon, 3:4*

If God is dead, somebody is going to have to take His place.

It will be megalomania or erotomania,

the drive for power or the drive for pleasure,

the clenched fist or the phallus,

Hitler or Hugh Hefner.

—*Malcolm Muggeridge*

Who would want to have sex with a computer? A lot of people, it seems. Cybersex is defined as sexual activity with a real or computer-simulated person or persons. It takes place in visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli of virtual reality.

Fiction offers examples of sexy computers—the Stepford wife, the cyborg escort in Spielberg's *AI*, the “fembot” of *Austen Powers*, *Bicentennial Man* (though never the *Terminator*). Sex with computers is dictionary-defined online before the technology really exists, and is “widely recognised in the VR community as a ha ha only serious projection of things to come.”¹ One 1992 magazine cover showed a man and woman with virtual reality (VR) helmets, sensor gloves, and gendered genital interfaces, the woman with mechanical hands over her breasts. Yet more than a decade later, that vision is still not technologically possible, limited by software and the hardware of body interfaces.

Currently, however, technology has made these advances:

- *Wired* magazine reports that a female vibrator

can have its force and rate of thrust controlled by a male vibrator via the Internet.²

- Realdoll, a multimillion-dollar California corporation, sells silicone “love-dolls” in various body shapes, shavings, and ethnicities, and as gendered females, males, and shemales, shipped to your home in coffin-sized boxes for sixty-five hundred to twenty thousand dollars. These dolls can be hired in Japan, and are reportedly taking business away from live call girls.³ Owners, says an industry spokesperson, are typically men “who don’t have intimacy in their lives,” but that “doesn’t mean they’re not searching for it.”⁴ Realdolls are passive, though the company hopes to offer animatronic dolls in the future.
- Sydney scientist Dominic Choy has patented a life-sized sex doll controlled by a computer as well as its own sound and touch sensors. Users put on a coordinated VR headset to imagine they’re in bed with anyone they choose. News reports say the doll will be “essentially passive” but “certain key body parts would be motor driven.”⁵ This is not yet on the market.
- Web sites like RedLightCenter.com offer adult chat in virtual bars, parties, and so forth. Users simply construct an avatar, a “digital person” or “3-D representation of yourself,” that interacts with other avatars and objects in a virtual world. Avatars allow users to “be whoever you want to be” and “live your fantasy” by creating their own profiles of gender, age, and sexual preference, and stating their desired outcomes: “a virtual relationship,” “erotic chat,” “social encounters,” “cyber sex,” “just checking it out,” or “cyber friendships.”⁶ Avatars can be acces-

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sorized with a range of hair types, eye color, clothes, and so forth. Avatars are controlled by keyboard commands—the up arrow means walk forward, right arrow means look right, space bar means jump. Upon meeting another avatar, a right click yields a menu of options like: see their profile, make friends, ignore (which renders them invisible to you), or “invite for sex,” which usually means simply watching the avatars. The graphics and promised interactivity are reportedly about as convincing as Playstation, and, I’m told, make you wonder if you’re a man or just a mouse. The site plans to introduce Voice Over IP to allow real users to talk, and potentially allows the use of Internet-mediated vibrators as described above.

- There are more than three hundred sex-themed computer games, but, again, the interactivity is in its infancy and uses nothing like the full sexual potential of the human body. Indeed, Martian archaeologists encountering current cybersex machines may conclude that the human body consisted of one eye and one hand and, in some cases, simple genitalia.

Pop culture reflects a demand for cybersex technologies. One online chat room participant gushed: “I’d never leave my apartment... I’d vote for Bill Gates for president. Think of the money that could be made.” The cartoon Dogbert is more cynical: “I can predict the future by assuming that money and male hormones are the driving forces for new technology. Therefore, when virtual reality gets cheaper than dating, society is doomed.”

History suggests that today’s sci-fi fantasy may be tomorrow’s mass-market technology. Ray Kurzweil, artificial intelligence guru, futurist, entrepreneur, and recipient of an MIT Inventor of the Year Award and eight honorary doctorates, predicted in 1999 the advent of VR sex with full auditory and visual realism by 2009, though without realistic touch, “admittedly an important limitation.”⁷

Kurzweil foresees that full touch will take another ten years, at which point virtual sex will offer “the all-enveloping, highly realistic, visual-auditory-tactile virtual environment,” and will become “a viable competitor to the real thing,” safer and eventually even “better in some ways,” providing physical “sensations that are more intense and pleasurable than conventional sex, as well as physical experiences that currently do not exist.”⁸

Kurzweil prophesies that virtual sex will be safer,

without possible disease or pregnancy, and that rape will be unknown, as users could log off.⁹ Sex workers will be replaced by machines, and group sex participants will experience the same sensations. He wonders what all this will do to marriage and commitment: “the definition of a monogamous relationship will become far less clear,” and the technology “will introduce an array of slippery slopes.” Yet he promises romance: “Stroll with your lover along a virtual Champs Elysees.”¹⁰

As a Christian, I would like to know: (1) Will this be possible? (2) Will it be good (in a moral and experiential sense)?

1. Will It Be Possible?

At base, the question is: Can humans be replicated and even improved upon?

In his essay, “The Evolution of Mind in the Twenty-First Century,” Kurzweil quantifies human brain-power—twenty million billion calculations per second—and extrapolates growth rates in computer processing speed. By 2019, he believes a thousand-dollar computer will match the human brain; by 2029, a thousand human brains.¹¹ Kurzweil also calls this “evolution by other means,” “faster than DNA-based evolution,” with its “blind” or “mindless watchmaker,” because silicon-based consciousness will be created by humans, a “mindful watchmaker.”¹² (He gives no account of how humans got mind from a material universe.)

Kurzweil speaks of copying the “design” of the human brain, which took “its original designer several billion years to develop.”¹³ He claims “the purpose of life—and of our lives—is to evolve, so we must be careful to guide evolution well.”¹⁴ Notice he posits design, purpose, and morality—all without reference to God, a philosophical feat akin to building a skyscraper on air.

Other essays in the fascinating book, *Are We Spiritual Machines?* offer solid responses, though we lack space here for more than a simple summary.

- Mind philosopher John Searle questions whether computers really think at all or merely process.
- Geneticist Michael Denton argues that machines are not fully analogous to humans: there is “elusive, subtle, irreducible ‘vital’ difference... between the two categories of the ‘organic’ and the ‘mechanical,’ and... these properties, human intelligence and human nature, may never be

replicated.¹⁵ He uses concepts of irreducible complexity.

- Mathematician and philosopher William Dembski argues that humans are not machines, and are more than merely machine-like. He reminds us that neuroscience has come up with no explanation of how consciousness arose from mere matter: "the mind-body problem," that is, no materialist model or causality for consciousness. For him, even Cartesian dualism, splitting matter from mind, is unsatisfactory because it views matter as primary and law governed.¹⁶

On these grounds, one may well question whether machines made after our likeness will ever equal or surpass us in anything but narrow functionalities. If they ever did surpass us, would humans continue to exist or would we become evolution's discards, useless as Cro-Magnon man? Would we be pets? In *Terminator II*, the machines kill humans. In *The Matrix*, they use us as batteries.¹⁷

2. Would Full Cybersex Be Good?

Cybersex will probably be popular and extremely profitable. For some benchmark, pornography in print and on screen may utilize only one or two of the five senses, but it still earns some fifty-seven billion dollars per annum, more than Hollywood or all professional sports combined.¹⁸ This despite Christian and other critiques of its effects.

Users may admit that it is not better than loving sex, but would claim it is better than nothing. Cybersex looks likely to involve more senses, and to outrate other media. Yet critiques of cybersex already seem apparent:

Sensual Critique

Computer scientist Sherry Epley objects based on the senses. Epley says she is surprised how often men at VR conferences ask how soon they can have sex with a computer: "I'm not at all afraid that a machine will replace me, I'm

just amazed that some men want so little out of sex." Epley says, "I want it all"—sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.¹⁹ (One could ask whether that is all.)

Sight and sound are easy, thanks to 3-D games, and the French perfume industry has designed an electronic nose, but touch is extremely difficult because "it includes our perceptions of temperature, weight, resistance, texture and motion," and "we are years away from even the most rudimentary experiments on the delicate sense of touch required for sexual pleasure." Epley does not think machine sex will ever provide the sensory stimulation another human body can.²⁰

If she is right, theistic arguments from design could well be constructed at this point. Evidence for God based on sexual pleasure may be a marketable argument.

Even if a machine could produce better sensory stimuli, Epley doubts whether users of virtual sex will find that the earth moves for them. Why? Because "everything is pre-programmed," and it would fall as flat as trying to tickle yourself.²¹

Solipsism Critique

Linda Williams's monograph, *Hardcore*, is upbeat about future virtual sex, but raises issues that may in fact doom it: "if true interactivity is to be defined as communication with the difference and unpredictability of an 'other' (as opposed to interacting with the sameness of oneself), the interaction with this female 'piece of a[...] in a software package' would seem to be the height of solipsism."²²

Solipsism is "in philosophy, the view or theory that only the self really exists or can be known. Now also, isolation, self-centredness, selfishness."²³ The philosophical base is René Descartes. Simply put, I think and feel, therefore I am a subject, but I'm not sure you exist as more than an object. So technology built on Cartesian dualism may inevitably lead to solipsism, just as a culture that so emphasizes individual experience may lose the "other," and thus worsen its own loneliness.²⁴

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Williams writes: "Where a real sex partner might surprise you, the woman on the screen has no independent agency. The paradox of these interactive games would seem to be that the greater the simulation of the agency of the 'other,' the more the real sense of the other is missing."²⁵ Humans have independent agency, the free will, which, for all it has cost the human race and God, may be part of the image of God in us. Can a machine have subjectivity? Can mind emerge from mere matter, consciousness from material?

Perhaps the logical end of materialism is the sexbot—a thing with some of the traits of a person, but none of its free choice to be accommodated by "my" selfishness. Technology may be more controllable (for some), but it allows a flight from true intimacy. It allows, in Martin Buber's terms, an I-It relationship and may preclude an I-Thou connection.

Part of intimacy is respect for the subjectivity, selfhood, and desires of the other. As Elizabeth Huwiler has shown, the ideal love poetry of the Song of Solomon "presents a view of male-female sexuality which is neither exploitive nor hierarchic. Both the man and the woman act on their own initiative as well as in response to each other."²⁶

If technology can be controlled, can it allow this?

The Individual Self-Critique

Hugh Hefner has written of cybersex: "She creates a character, who climbs into a hot tub and performs outrageous acts on your noncorporeal body. Is she a she? Does it matter? Concepts of male and female are so old-fashioned, so analog. On the Internet everyone is beautiful."²⁷

Media reports credit cybersex with ultimate "electronic liberation"—sex free from one's race, class, gender, name, and body.²⁸ So one cannot say that cybersex is playing with yourself—in fact it's playing without yourself. Sociologist Sherry Turckle has written: "The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life."²⁹

But such slippery constructions of self make relationships problematic. Being unselfed, how can one know oneself or be true to oneself? And how can one know or be true to another? How can a multiphrenic self be intimate or make a commitment? Surely love (and making love) must involve some form of knowing, even as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12).

Wholism Critique

Will cyberspace utilize the full potential of the human body, or just the brain?

One therapist has written: "Mind and body are not separate phenomena, one being somehow spirit and the other matter. Mind and body are both aspects of one information system. Biology is a process of information transduction. Mind and body are two ways of conceptualizing this single information system."³⁰

Yet cyberspace itself remains inherently dualistic. Science writer Margaret Wertheim calls it "a repackaging of the old idea of Heaven but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format."³¹ It is a Platonic heaven where disembodied data flows freely, unlimited by the flesh; an ideal world beyond the physical, yet undeniably real; a virtual paradise for the questionably virtuous, a place where secular immaterial souls can pass without judgment.

Robotics whiz Hans Moravec of the prestigious Carnegie Mellon University predicts the possibility of uploading entire human minds into computers to live on in a meatless heaven forever (backed up against system failure).³² This drive to transcend the body is dualistic. Art theorist Simon Penny argues that "the philosophical tradition around which the computer is built inherently affirms the Cartesian duality," and that distinctions between software and hardware, and between data and substrate, are dualistic.³³

What role can the body have in this vision? Cyberpunk novelist William Gibson derides the body as "meat" and privileges the online mind over body, yet Gibson nonetheless credits the flesh with its ways of knowing.

In *Neuromancer* he describes a sexual encounter in these terms: "It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read...and then he was in her, effecting the transmission of the old message."³⁴

Kurzweil also recognizes that the body is important, that much of human thought is directed toward the body's survival and pleasure, and that

some philosophers maintain that achieving human level intelligence is impossible without a body. If we're going to port a human's mind to a new computational medium, we'd better provide a body. A disembodied mind will quickly get depressed. There are a variety of bodies that we will provide for our machines, and that they will provide for themselves: bodies built through nanotechnology...vir-

tual bodies (that exist only in virtual reality), bodies comprised by swarms of nanobots.³⁵

This, too, is dualism, positing a mind/self that is ontologically and practically separate from a body, capable of taking a body or bodies at its choosing, but not limited to the body.

Yet dualism has been challenged recently. Traditional understandings of the human person could be broadly classified along a continuum between the following two extremes:

- Reductive materialism, which claims that all human experience, including the rational, emotional, and religious, can be reduced to chemistry and physics. It leaves little space for any theology.
- Radical dualism, in which the mind/soul is practically and ontologically separate from the body, and the person is the soul, not the body.

Dualism is the traditional Christian view, but it is increasingly difficult to match with biblical studies and systematic theology. Hence, other views have attracted recent attention from Christians, intermediate views that are less materialist and/or less dualistic.

- Wholistic dualism, in which mind/soul and body are ontologically separate but functionally a unity, being interactive and in causal relations and functional dependencies.
- Trichotomism, which posits body, soul, and spirit as separate entities.
- Monism, which describes the persona as just one entity, with a soul or spirit that is, however, part of the whole. Monism recognizes that the experiences traditionally explained by a soul cannot be explained by a brain alone, and demonstrate other parts or aspects of a person. Various types of monism include: Nancey Murphy's nonreductive physicalism, Kevin Corcoran's constitution view, and John B. Wong's Christian wholism.³⁶

Recent experimental findings in the neurosciences are demonstrating connections between the thoughts and emotions and the functions and structures of the physical brain, suggesting that human experience can be accounted for without recourse to a nonmaterial soul.³⁷ "As a whole, those neuroscientists who are Christians champion the notion of psychosomatic unity... though they are careful to avoid the reduction of mental states or spiritual awareness, for example, to neuronal interaction."³⁸

Meanwhile, recent shifts in the disciplines of biblical studies and theology have moved away from traditional dualism (or, in some cases, Old Testament monism and New Testament dualism) toward "anthropological monism."³⁹ Christian philosopher Nancey Murphy concludes that "the dualism that has appeared to be biblical teaching has been a result of poor translations"; that most Christians have been dualists largely because of cultural influences; and that nonreductive physicalist anthropology would be a useful corrective to Christian systematic theology.⁴⁰

Cognitive scientists researching the new area of "embodiment" are finding that body and mind are not as separate as once thought. For example, some violinists' hands have been shown to move too fast for nerve signals to travel to the brain and back, so the hand seems to be using its own intelligence. "German psychologists have observed that children who cannot walk backwards cannot subtract," and those who cannot balance have not had the bodily experience of the equals sign, suggesting that even abstract mental concepts may have their basis in bodily experience.⁴¹

Embodiment attempts to retheorize the separation "of the mind and body and the hierarchical ordering of mind over body" that have dominated Western thought since Plato, and through Augustine, Descartes, and Kant.⁴² Of course, this is hotly debated, but embodiment seems to be pointing in the direction of some form of monism or wholism.⁴³

If human feelings and thoughts are embodied in such complex ways, can human love and sex be anything but embodied? Can sex and love be

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imagined in a nonembodied way? The Genesis tradition describes bodily love with the deceptively simple phrase "to know" (Gen. 4:1).

Beginnings of a Biblical Theology Critique

The Song of Songs praises whole-person love, based on wholistic anthropology. The woman says:

*I found him whom my soul loveth:
I held him, and would not let him go. (3:4 KJV)*

The King James Version translates *soul*, the Septuagint translated *psyche*, so it is easy to read this through a Platonic lens as two immortal souls in Ideal love. But the Hebrew word *nepesh* knows nothing of that. It means a whole person, a personality, a life, a being, an individual, oneself.⁴⁴ It dies, and has physical dimensions, including appetite, desire, hunger, wish, and even throat.⁴⁵

Also, Paul's concept of wholistic love, countering the Platonic imbalance of a previous age, is relevant here. In 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, he quotes a number of Corinthian slogans and contradicts them:

*[You say,] "Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food,"
and God will do away with both of them.*

The slogan infers that God is interested only in the immortal part of a person, whereas "the body is morally irrelevant" because "sin occurs on a different 'level.'"⁴⁶ This is classic dualism, perhaps proto-Gnosticism. And its wrong eschatology (destruction of the soma) causes a wrong ethic (the body's actions don't matter).

Paul counters:

*But the body is not for sexual immorality, it is for the Lord, and
the Lord for the body.*

According to J. N. Sevenster, an authority on ancient Greek thought, "It is inconceivable that such a statement could come from [a dualist like] Seneca [for example]. For him the soul, the spirit, could glorify the gods," writes Sevenster, "but this is impossible for the contemptible body which always threatens the purity of the spirit."⁴⁷

But Paul does not privilege *psyche* or *pneuma* over *soma*.⁴⁸ And this is in the current fallen human body, not yet the "glorious body" of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:38–40; Phil. 3:21).

Next, Paul corrects the wrong eschatology:

And God resurrected the Lord and will resurrect us by his power.

Note the logic of the systematic theology here: the resurrection of Christ guarantees the believer's bodily resurrection, and thus highly values the body.⁴⁹ The afterlife will include bodies, not just disembodied souls.

*Don't you know that your bodies are parts of Christ's body? So
would I remove parts of Christ's body and make them parts of the
body of a prostitute? Never!*

Then Paul references Old Testament theological anthropology:

*Don't you know that person who joins a prostitute in intimacy
is one flesh (with her)? For "the two, it is said, will be one
flesh." But the person who joins the Lord in intimacy is one
spirit (with him).*

Paul uses one word for the relationship both to Christ and harlot (*kollao* = to join, to bond, to glue, to bind indissolubly). This infers that sexuality is not just a bodily matter but a whole-person (including spiritual) matter. He also dramatically offers the choice, "To whom will you join yourself?"⁵⁰ The Greek word *kollao* is used in the Septuagint for Solomon's joining to unbelieving women who turn his heart to other gods (1 Kings 11:2).

Run from sexual immorality!

Then another slogan is quoted:

[You say,] "Every sin a person may commit is outside the body."

And Paul counters:

*But the person who sins sexually sins against their own body!
Or don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy
Spirit, who lives in you,...*

For Paul, the body is not the prison of Platonic thought, but a shrine.⁵¹ Rosner writes, "Paul could be saying 'don't go to the temple (to use prostitutes), you are the temple!'"⁵²

...whom you received from God...

Paul never misses a chance to emphasize that all aspects of salvation are by God's gracious gift, especially when he writes of our duty in response.

...and you do not belong to yourselves? You were purchased at great cost.

Clearly the cross—grace—is anything but cheap. This clearly refers to Christ's sacrificial death on a cross, a bodily act that glorified God (John 21:19).

So reveal God's glory in your body.

Gordon Fee writes: "in most Western churches, where sexual mores have blatantly moved toward pagan standards, the doctrine of the sanctity of the body needs to be heard anew within the church... Those who take Scripture seriously," he continues, "are not pruders or legalists at this point; rather they recognize that God purchased us for higher things."⁵³

This passage does anything but devalue sex. It recognizes the psycho-somato-spiritual bonding inherent in sex between two whole people. Fee calls this "one of the most important theological passages in the N[ew] T[estament] about the human body. It should forever lay to rest the implicit dualism of so much that has been passed off as Christian."⁵⁴

Clear wholistic anthropology is important to Christian systematics, as Adventists have begun to see in connection with the state of the dead (with its implications for hell and God's character, and for spiritualism); with bodily health as part of gospel restoration; and with eschatology and more. Yet wholism affects our doctrine of sex also, and it is important that Christians be taught this important aspect of discipleship as part of balanced biblical preaching. Should Platonic or Victorian self-censorship stop Adventists from teaching all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27) about sexuality, or should we discuss it frankly and respectfully, as the Bible does, as part of balanced preaching and teaching?

Where from Here?

Christians should respond to new porn technologies not with knee-jerk judgmental outrage, but with fine moral reasoning from social effects and from scriptural principles of what it means to be human and to love. Some churches

may define virtual monogamy as not using avatars of anyone but one's spouse and encourage computer-mediated sex between a married couple if one spouse is away or physically injured (Matt. 5:28). Others may proscribe all online sex because it has no chance of procreating.

Beyond ethical questions, Christians should take this opportunity to have a conversation about human nature and origins. The Church should seize this opportunity to make a reasoned case for its view of human purpose that underlies ethics, persuading with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15). We may even point people toward the experience of whole-person love and the grace and truth of a Creator who was made flesh. ■

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48. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 468.
49. In 1 Corinthians 15, he describes the resurrection body, which is improved, but retains its identity. Dahl's "somatic continuity." See *ibid.*, 464.
50. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans), 251; and Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 467: "To whom will the believer 'stick'?"
51. Tertullian: "In Platonic language indeed the body is a prison, but in the apostle's it is 'the temple of God' because it is in Christ." *Treatise on the Soul*, 54:5, in Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 479.
52. Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 2000), 220.
53. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 266.
54. *Ibid.*, 251.

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