Tomorrow's Eve, an Aesthetic of Impossibles, and the Next Gen Study of Religion

Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world.
~ Archimedes

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact it does both at the same time.
~ Brian Massumi

It seems appropriate and minimally responsible that I look forward as well as backward when finding myself approaching career's end. This essay is an eager exercise of this Janus endeavor.[1] I look backward that I might see forward in terms of the academic study of religion.

Many of my teachers at the University of Chicago and the scholars I worked with throughout my five-decade career were the principal founders of the modern academic study of religion. We have arrived at the end of that first generation.[2] It is humbling to realize that most of these founders and shapers are no longer active, most deceased. It is the dawn of a new generation. During the first generation, the world changed; notably it changed far more than did the study of religion or academia itself. For the field to thrive, likely even to survive, the emerging generation of religion scholars has the opportunity—indeed, the responsibility—to contribute to complex global and local issues. At a time when science, technology, and business prevail, at a time when STEM is an acronym broadly touted in education, the world desperately needs humanist's insights about wonderfully messy human processes.

My energies and interests continue to expand. One area is the future as it is imagined and advanced by both the arts and technology. Given that a decade ago we didn't know what an iPhone was and a quarter century ago we were unfamiliar with the Internet, how can we begin to imagine a technological world and its implications twenty years from now? I'm thrilled by the endless possibilities that seem likely to arise in the future.

Androids, automata, robots, cyborgs, and AIs seem iconic of the modern technological era, yet, since antiquity, a rich body of literature, art, and technology has told stories of the making of artificial beings: Pygmalion's ivory Galatea, Adam's sidekick Eve, Golem,

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[1] Whereas this book is intended for a general readership, this essay offers a focused comment on the future of the academic study of religion that is based on these essays. Since it does not "fit" aesthetically or in terms of intended audience, yet is still relevant, I offer it as an appendix.

[2] It is appropriate to mark the beginning of the modern academic study of religion with the Supreme Court case Abingdon v. Schempp (1963) that opened the legal teaching of religion in state supported institutions of learning.

automata, Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* creature, Maria in Lang's classic 1929 film "Metropolis," Asimov's robots, Kubrick's HAL2000, cyborgs like Robocop and "Star Trek's" The Borg, dystopian AI/Robots like the terminators, ominous Cybermen and Daleks in "Doctor Who," and androids such as Data in "Star Trek," Ava in "Ex Machina," Maeve in "Westworld." While there is a futurist bent to these stories, since antiquity the making of such figures has been a prominent way of asking and considering the most fundamental and profound questions of religion and human nature.

There are common elements to these stories and artworks and technologies. I've chosen the name *Tomorrow's Eve* to refer to this cluster of made figures and the ideas and issues raised by their existence. I imagine her as taking many forms, appearing in both genders. This name was inspired by the 1886 French novel with the English title *Tomorrow's Eve* by Auguste de Villier. It is a strange and baldly misogynist novel in which an English Lord acquires Thomas Edison's inventiveness to create an improved android in the likeness of his beautiful, but dull, human lover.

Among the many stories that comprise Tomorrow's Eve, the makers of these artificial beings are exclusively men; indeed, I can't think of an exception. The beings made are frequently adult females; many identify with Biblical Eve. I'd argue that even the creature in Shelley's *Frankenstein* represents Mary's feminine voice. These male makings are not based in biology, that is, sexual procreation, nor do they involve women. The female objects are constructed for the sexual pleasure of or to demonstrate the greater-than-human power of their male makers. Being manufactured, these female beings do not have mothers as models. They do not grow up or grow old. Their behavior is determined by their male programmers; think Silicon Valley nerds and religious patriarchs. Holding that the prowess to make a sentient being transcends mere human power, the makers, not uncommonly atheists, often consider their success evidence that they are gods or like gods, at the least supermen; examples are Edison in *Tomorrow's Eve*, Nathan in "Ex Machina," and Dr. Robert Ford in "Westworld."

Tomorrow's Eve's mission, in many of these stories, is to become fully sentient, or at least to be embraced as indistinguishable from humans as she is seen even by those humans who know full well that she is a machine, a made object. Her task is to pass what I call the *Ultimate Turing Test*. Through her efforts to be human, Tomorrow's Eve reveals to us our most distinctively human traits. She must master smooth self-movement. What we refer to as robotic movement is mechanical and jerky.

She must have an attractive feminine realistic and typically sexy physicality. EVE in WALL-E is a little egg-shaped robot, but she is clearly attractive and she dances in space. Frankenstein's creature is sensitive, intelligent, and empathetic, yet he suffers deeply because of his horrifying appearance. Ava in "Ex Machina" has both smooth movement and she also finishes her own making so as to appear as a beautiful woman. In "Westworld," Maeve is a brothel madam whose very occupation is to sexually please human male guests. All of the stories inspired by Galatea feature either "fair ladies" or creepy dollies coveted by men. My favorite is the folk story about Descartes travelling with a life-sized dolly of his deceased illegitimate child. Tomorrow's Eve must acquire a

sensuous and expressive voice. Spike Jonze's Samantha in the film "Her" achieves this as an operating system without any physical existence.

Tomorrow's Eve must acquire a capacity to create and innovate and be free. Her freedom is frequently demonstrated by acts of wanton violence against her maker: think Ava in "Ex Machina," the creature in *Frankenstein*, Dolores and Maeve in "Westworld," perhaps also Eve. The rise in 1993 of Verner Vinge's notion of "singularity," indicating that moment when the AI/robots will gain super intelligence and take over the world (think terminators), is the concern of dozens of artistic treatments as well as a stated concern of Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Stephen Hawking. Despite her propensity for performing shockingly horrible coldly-calculated acts of violence, Tomorrow's Eve invariably shows more humanity and empathy than do her male human makers. Think of the endearing robots in Star Wars; even Frankenstein's creature demonstrates a deep sensitivity and empathy despite the horror of his violence.

The stories that include examples of this leitmotif I call Tomorrow's Eve would seem necessarily to be tragedies because men cannot become gods, machines cannot become sentient human beings. The value of constructing categories is that they make distinctions in reality. When paired, the distinction of one named category is stated in the terms of its exclusion of anything belonging to its paired named category; god not human, female not male, in not out. Yet, Tomorrow's Eve achieves, simply by her conception, by her existence, a structurality that impossibly holds at once the exclusivity of each member of paired categories and also their identity. She is machine/object/made thing; she is sentient/human or at least considered as such. And she is embraced as both at once by those aware of the impossibility of this copresence. She passes the Ultimate Turing Test, being recognized and treated as sentient by those who know that she is a made object, a machine, a thing.

This structurality that is Tomorrow's Eve might also be described as an *aesthetic of impossibles*. It reveals a kind of strength greater than the power of production, the making of an object. It is the structurality whose force does not dissipate or bring to a halt as does the production of meaning or an object or a status. It is an oscillating dynamic from which making and meaning become even possible. It is the attribute of language where words both are and are not what they reference. It is the attribute of metaphor in which we understand something by equating it with something we know that it is not. It is the attribute of art we call artifice. It is the positing by religions of worlds and beings that are unbelievable and incredible while attributing to them an ontological and ontogenetic primacy. It is the dynamics of the Christ event in which man both is and is not God, in which death, both is not life and is life everlasting. In all of these examples that correlate with Tomorrow's Eve, her strength is not in facilitating the resolution of some tension that only appears to be impossible. Her strength resides in the human capacity to embrace the impossible as generative of vitality and ongoingness. Tomorrow's Eve is not a categorical anomaly; she is, impossibly, both machine and human. Our very imagination of her is an exercise in the *aesthetic of the impossible*.

Tomorrow's Eve's greatest obstacle to becoming human is that she does not have the experience of being humanly bodied. She shows that the exercise of the *aesthetic of the impossible* is corporeally based; only human bodies can experience it. In her efforts to be human, Tomorrow's Eve reminds that *all concepts are corporeal*, that is, all concepts are based in the self-moving experiences of the distinctively human body. Many concepts simply baffle "Star Trek's" Data because his body is manufactured and programmed, not sentient; he can't proprioceptively feel himself moving. The distinctive shapes of myths and gods, Tomorrow's Eve as well, are inventions possible only if corporeally based. Tomorrow's Eve reminds us that memory and experience and suffering, accumulated over time by repetition, are essential to consciousness, sentience, awareness; this insight is fundamental to Dolores and Maeve in "Westworld." Tomorrow's Eve shows us that, despite the masculine penchant for a bodiless transcendent realty, the *aesthetic of impossibles* at the core of religions is always already comprised of self-moving human bodies. She shows us that only human biology has evolved the capacity to not only tolerate, but also to invent vitalizing metastabilities to manifest the *aesthetic of the impossible*. Machines handle zeroes and ones, but not both at the same time. Machines either go into an eternal loop or crash when confronted with impossibles.

The academic drive to produce meaning and to be conclusive is similar to the properties of machines. As Henri Bergson showed, to reduce to meaning is a retrograde movement to a halt. Tomorrow's Eve shows us that body-based experience creates memory and skill and patterns that support the ongoing processes of perception and knowing in which self and other are at once distinct yet inseparable. These faculties of body that are designed to connect and identify self with other necessarily require transcendence and these quotidian experiences of "other" comprise the experiential basis for concepts of transcendence of the largest order; *theos* is corporeal. Despite the penchant of academics and the religious elite to privilege word meanings and reason, Tomorrow's Eve reminds us that, for almost all, religions are comprised not so much of the reasoned meaning of doctrine and creed as they are comprised of the practice and experience and self-movement and perception and feeling kinds of knowing that are all bodied. Repetition inherent in religious practice is essential to develop the skills to live a religious life. The accumulation of experience forges a base for feelings of coherence, always copresent with incoherence, the ever-looming threat of chaos. For students of religion, to chart the processes by which coherence/incoherence are felt and provide the basis for action and value seems more satisfying than does the articulation of halting meaning, especially in a complexly diverse world. Tomorrow's Eve offers an alternative to seeking only bare-naked truth or fundamental reality. She shows us that this pornographic approach that demands to see everything, needs to be supplanted with the *aesthetic of impossibles*, an aesthetic of the human body where indeterminacies and complexities generate vital movement, where seduction has greater primacy than does production.

Should we be inspired by Tomorrow's Eve, we will recognize that not only is this *aesthetic of impossibles* fundamental to language, metaphor, and art, it is also the forte

of religions with their rituals, myths, gods, and demons. Perhaps it is time to move beyond considering religions as distinguished largely for their offering meaning, reducing pain in times of inexplicable loss, and enhancing joy. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the broadly held view that religions provide answers to the hard questions related to mortality and evil and other inexplicables. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the broadly held view that religion is inherently good. Perhaps it is even time to move beyond the presumption of a theological foundation as essential to religions, that is, the unquestioned independent existence of a Radical Other. Rather than seeking a halt by finding meaning, perhaps it is time to embrace the implications of Tomorrow's Eve's *aesthetic of impossibles*, where the copresence of "is" and "is not" is appreciated as energizing and vitalizing, as fueling the sameness and change that comprise traditions that span millennia. Tomorrow's Eve suggests a post-theological, post-meaning, de-centered, post-cosmogonic approach to how and what we recognize as the religious in *religions*, and how we construct the academic and folk category we call *religion*.

These comments adumbrate but a few ways the next gen students of religion might be inspired by Tomorrow's Eve, by the recurring leitmotif among her stories and ideas that span millennia. I end, however, with one element in the current presence of Tomorrow's Eve that suggests something more radically innovative as the future unfolds. The recent explosion of the sophistication of Artificial Intelligence and the gradual yet undeniable integration of AI with human biology suggest change on a scale and of a type that has never before occurred. I do not believe that AI/robots will supersede human beings; there will be no singularity. I do not believe that we will enter a post-human, post-biological reality; there will be no world run by robots ignoring or subjugating humans. Yet there is abundant evidence that the interface between human biology and AI/robotics is becoming increasingly transparent. While Donna Haraway discussed this development and its gendered implications a quarter century ago, certainly today the outline of this future is increasingly clear. There are many possibilities, yet the one I believe most likely is the increasing rise of AI/robotically enhanced or augmented biological humans. I refer to them by the term *metahuman cyborgs*. These most recent formations of Tomorrow's Eve, as evident in a plethora of techno-biological developments and popular superheroes, offer tantalizing possibilities for imagining the future of humans and religion. What will be the religions of metahuman cyborgs? Certainly, to incorporate the near inevitable metahuman cyborgs in our understanding of the world and also religion will take courage and imagination. It is for the emerging generation of religion scholars to creatively engage what, at least to me, are remarkably exciting possibilities.