Net Results

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The gig economy: anathema to integral human development?

In June I presented a keynote on privacy and regulation in Germany at the annual meeting of the Societas Ethica, the European Society for Research in Ethics. It was founded in 1964 by a Swiss theologian and maintains its theological grounding, though such a perspective is neither required nor expected from members, who come from many areas of study and interest.

The theme for the event was Digital Humanity: Ethical Analysis and Responses in the Age of Transformation, discussed over four days at the beautiful 17th-century Evangelische Akademie in Tutzing, in the Bavarian lakeland area south of Munich.

The talks included an examination of the ways social media alter the development of the psychological self, an analysis of how technology affects the concept of autonomy, a consideration of technology and empathy, and more.

I found it fascinating, in great part because speakers approached topics in ways so different from the context in which I usually think and write about technology and its effects on society and individuals. I was particularly interested in the talks that did take a theological angle, because this was truly a take I'd not considered before.

A striking example was a paper presented by Dr James Caccamo, an assistant professor of theology at St Joseph's University in Philadelphia. His paper, (Morally) Sustainable Employment for the Digitalised Workforce, comprises an analysis of the gig economy – those unfixed, self-employed jobs provided for companies such as Uber and Deliveroo – viewed in the context of the Catholic Church's Integral Human Development goals, which are seen as ways of supporting the authentic development of the individual within a just society.

Seen in such a framework, the gig economy has some positives, Caccamo says, in that it presents new opportunities for employment and services to communities, and in some ways supports a goal to "live into uniqueness" by enabling people to make their own work choices.

Stability

However – and it is a big however – "the gig economy likely fails to provide the things that would support integral human development – wages, collective bargaining, health coverage, unemployment benefits. It effectively removes all the liabilities of a company and shifts them on to the public sector."

This undermines the stability that would support integral human development's goal of "authentic development". The gig economy also "may not support the social aspects of personhood" because people work in isolation, without co-workers or supportive mentors.

Morally sustainable gig work, he concluded, should provide supportive structures such as health insurance, retirement benefits and unemployment support; enhance one's opportunities for refreshing a work-life balance; and develop new modes of professional development and mentorship.

Afterwards, I asked him how he had come to take this particular analytical approach. "We often think about labour through the lens of rights: to a just wage, to equal opportunity and treatment, to collective bargaining. Rights are a powerful and important concept, helping us see critical areas that need protecting.

"But because we have already identified key rights in society, thinking in terms of them can limit what we identify as important when thinking about work. Integral human development can be helpful when thinking about work because it describes the human person in a more robust way, enabling us to think more holistically about the role of work in our lives. Work is a key thing that shapes who we are, and understanding the breadth of its impact on us is helpful."

Some of the problems of the gig economy can probably be tackled via legislation, for example taxing companies that have eliminated benefits, he says. "But it won't be so easy to address the 'human side' of this fragmentation and temporarisation: loss of community, growth and development; a dissolving sense of work as a vocation that one devotes time to; and the loss of a key location where people develop their skills, abilities and passions to become their best selves."

For me, Caccamo's analysis provided a new way of thinking about shared concerns and helped me realise that different approaches can make such topics accessible and compelling to different audiences. With such important issues, we need the tools of many analytical and interpretative frameworks to grasp the threats – and opportunities – of these technologies.