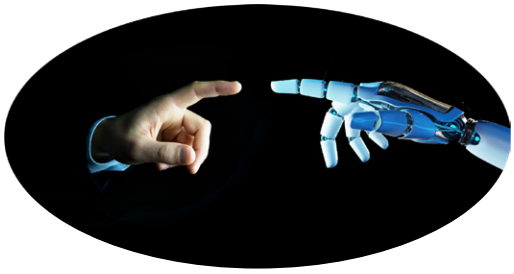
HUMAN CONDITION IN DIGITAL AGE: ETHICAL, SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHALLENGES



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HUMAN CONDITION IN DIGITAL AGE: ETHICAL, SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Bojan Žalec: *Editorial*
1

Bojan Žalec: *The Plausibility of Mind Uploading*
11

Roman Globokar: *Experiencing Mortality and Transcendence in the Digital Age*
35

Branko Klun: *Christian Incarnation in the Age of Digital Disembodiment*
55

Mateja Centa Strahovnik, Vojko Strahovnik: *Talking and Thinking With AI: How AI Chatbots Restructure Epistemic Identity and Virtue*
75

Barbara Simonič: *Empathy Between Embodiment and Digital Depersonalization: Philosophical and Psychological Aspects*
97

Nadja Furlan Štante: *Emotional Cyborgs in a Hyperconnected World: AI, Embodiment, and Ecofeminist, Theological Reflections on Humanity and the Divine*
119

Ivan Platovnjak, Snežana Brumec: *Between Disenchantment and Re-enchantment: Exploring AI as a Companion in the Inner Life*
141

Erika Prijatelj: *AI in Mental Health: A Tool for Support, Not a Substitute for the Human Person*
161

Jonas Miklavčič: *The New Escape: Reality, Virtuality, and Religious Experience*
175

David Kraner: *Artificial Intelligence in the Educational Process: The Role of Communication and the Pitfalls of Alienation*
195

Anja Zalta: *Online Salafism – the Tension to (Co)Exist in Religious and Ideological Plurality*
219

Stjepan Štivić: *Technological Salvation: Neuralink's Campaign Through the Lens of Religious Symbolism*
241

REGULAR PAPERS / DRUGE RAZPRAVE

Yue Bai (Yao Fa), Yaoping Liu: *Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand: Practices, Local Patronage, and Challenges*
259

Igor Škamperle: *Dileme med progresivno in konservativno mislijo: vir krize sodobne družbe*
295

Gašper Pirc: *Duhovna oskrba v vojski v času pospešene digitalizacije, tehnološkega napredka in družbenih prelomov*
311

Abstracts / Povzetki
331

About the Authors / O avtoricah in avtorjih
353

EDITORIAL

Introduction

Digital technologies and artificial intelligence no longer constitute a marginal topic for the humanities and theology; they increasingly shape the very conditions under which we think, believe, relate, and hope. The thematic block of this issue is devoted precisely to this new constellation. It brings together twelve contributions[1] from theology, philosophy, religious studies, psychology, sociology, and education, all of which confront the same fundamental question: what happens to the human being—embodied, relational, vulnerable, spiritual—when life is ever more mediated by algorithms, platforms, and intelligent machines?

The articles share a sober but not despairing stance. They neither celebrate a frictionless technological salvation nor demonize innovation as such. Instead, they insist that these developments must be interpreted through a (thick) account of human person(hood), one that does justice to embodiment, mortality, relationality, and transcendence.

Several contributions show how technological imaginaries such as mind uploading, transhumanist enhancement, and affective computing presuppose controversial philosophical and theological assumptions. Others explore the more everyday, but no less consequential, fields of education, mental health, spiritual practice, and online religious communication. Across this diversity, some common

[1] Almost all articles in the block (Žalec, Globokar, Klun, Centa Strahovnik and Strahovnik, Simonič, Furlan Štante, Platovnjak and Brumec, Prijatelj, Miklavčič, Kraner, Štivić), except for the article from Zalta, are the result of research within the research project (J6-60105) *Theology and digitalization: anthropological and ethical challenges*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

convictions emerge. First, the human person cannot be reduced to data, information processing, or functional equivalence: biological embodiment, lived experience, and social embeddedness are not accidental but constitutive. Second, the digital and AI revolution is inherently ambivalent. It opens new possibilities for care, learning, and spiritual search, while simultaneously intensifying risks of depersonalization, alienation, manipulation, and symbolic inflation. Third, religious and spiritual categories—incarnation, salvation, transcendence, virtue, the sacred, re-enchantment—do not simply belong to a pre-digital past. They are being re-appropriated, translated, and sometimes trivialized within digital culture, and therefore require renewed critical discernment. Finally, the issue suggests that the humanities, and philosophy and theology in particular, have an indispensable role in articulating a humane, ethically responsible, and spiritually sensitive response to AI.

Mapping the Terrain: From Disembodiment to Re-enchantment

The opening article by Bojan Žalec addresses one of the most radical promises associated with digital technology: the possibility of *mind uploading*—transferring the human mind to a non-biological substrate. On careful philosophical examination, this promise turns out to rest on a dualist and functionalist conception that abstracts from the biological, phenomenological, and social dimensions of consciousness. Žalec argues that our current knowledge strongly suggests the dependence of mind on the living, embodied organism; the role of the "lived body" in identity, social integration, and everyday coping cannot simply be replicated in "silicon". Mind uploading thus appears not only technologically and scientifically questionable, but also more fundamentally: a philosophical analysis and reflection show its improbability.

Roman Globokar also takes up a grand technological narrative—Yuval Noah Harari's vision of *Homo Deus*—but approaches it from the perspective of mortality and transcendence. He contrasts Harari's dataist, algorithm-centred outlook with Hans Jonas's philosophy of the living organism, which insists on the irreducibility of life and

the ambivalent gift of mortality. On this basis, Globokar retrieves the biblical understanding of the human being created in the image of God: finite, vulnerable, and mortal, yet simultaneously oriented beyond death. Against deterministic algorithmic imaginaries, he proposes faith in a personal God as a source of freedom, responsibility, and hope.

The theme of embodiment receives a distinctively Christological and ecclesial articulation in Branko Klun's reflection on *Christian incarnation in the age of digital disembodiment*. Engaging transhumanism, posthumanism, and digital self-optimization, Klun shows how Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection affirm the body as gift, relation, and vocation. The answer to the technological dream of escaping corporeality is not a mere defence of "nature" against "technology", but the vision of the body transfigured in love and embedded in concrete, "face-to-face presence".

Where these first contributions focus on broad anthropological and theological frameworks, Mateja Centa Strahovnik and Vojko Strahovnik turn to a specific technological actor: AI chatbots. They analyse how large language models reshape our *epistemic identity* and *epistemic virtues*—curiosity, humility, open-mindedness, and responsibility. Although chatbots do not qualify as full epistemic agents, the authors argue that we are increasingly tempted to treat them as epistemic partners or quasi-partners. This ambiguous status has profound consequences: AI not only supplies information but also affects what counts as knowledge, how it is validated, and how human cognitive capacities are extended. The authors call for reflective practices that sustain human autonomy and virtuous collaboration rather than passive reliance.

The interpersonal and affective dimension of digital culture comes to the fore in Barbara Simonič's article on *empathy between embodiment and digital depersonalization*. Empathy, as a cornerstone of relationships and social cohesion, depends heavily on bodily presence, non-verbal cues, temporal synchronicity, and shared space. Digital communication, by contrast, is often text-based, asynchronous, and anonymous. Simonič argues that this shift can erode the conditions for a full empathic experience and foster depersonalization.

Philosophical and psychological perspectives converge in showing that technological mediation must be critically evaluated in light of what it does to our capacity to perceive and be affected by others as embodied persons.

A related yet distinct angle is developed by Nadja Furlan Štante, who, from the standpoint of theological ecofeminism, investigates the figure of the *emotional cyborg*. In a hyperconnected world saturated with affective computing and artificial emotional intelligence, the boundaries between human and machine "emotions" become increasingly porous. Furlan Štante examines how these entanglements transform identity, emotional literacy, and relationality, with particular attention to gendered experiences and stereotypes. She raises pressing questions about emotional alienation, commodification of affect, and the search for authenticity in environments where digital mediation often replaces embodied encounters. At the same time, she probes how theological conceptions of embodiment and relationality might be reimagined in this cyborgian context.

Ivan Platovnjak and Snežana Brumec move from the social and cultural to the explicitly spiritual dimension. Their article explores the speculative possibility of an AI platform designed to accompany the *inner life*: meaning-making, existential reflection, and spiritual search. Drawing on Iain McGilchrist's distinction between right- and left-hemisphere cognitive styles, they ask whether a fundamentally "left-hemispheric" artefact such as AI could be repurposed to support holistic perception and dialogical presence. They envision an interface that "invites rather than prescribes, listens rather than instructs," while also acknowledging the ethical and epistemological risks such a project entails. The question they pose—whether AI might contribute to a re-enchantment of experience—reverberates throughout the volume.

The clinical and pastoral implications of AI appear in Erika Prijatelj's essay on *AI in mental health*. Against the backdrop of global shortages in mental health services, she explores how AI can provide scalable, personalized support. Yet she insists, from the vantage point of Christian virtue ethics and theological anthropology, that authentic healing is holistic, integrating body, mind, and spirit. It is always

embedded in moral and relational contexts. AI may assist clinicians and patients, but it cannot substitute the moral discernment, spiritual depth, and personal presence that constitute genuine flourishing. Its proper role is auxiliary and complementary, oriented toward promoting virtue and dignity.

In Jonas Miklavčič's article, the focus shifts to *escapism* and *religious experience* in digital culture. He identifies a cultural reversal: where virtuality once functioned as an escape from burdensome reality, many people now seek escape from the overstimulation and performativity of virtual life. Practices such as digital detoxes and offline retreats manifest a longing for silence, interiority, and timelessness—qualities that structurally resemble religious experience. Miklavčič interprets this as a largely implicit re-engagement with the sacred, not necessarily at the level of explicit belief but as a structure of experience. The article thus exposes the religious undercurrents in apparently secular reactions to digital overload.

David Kraner turns to the educational sphere, examining how AI is transforming the *educational process* and, above all, the role of communication. He highlights well-known advantages—personalized learning, support in explaining complex concepts, increased engagement, and help in preparing materials—while also discussing the pitfalls: dependence on technology, concerns about accuracy, plagiarism, and the weakening of interpersonal connections. Successful integration, Kraner argues, demands not only infrastructure and teacher training but also critical reflection on ethical implications and on how to preserve the human dimension of education.

Digital religion takes on a more explicitly socio-political face in Anja Zalta's analysis of online Salafism. She explores how Salafist influencers harness social networks and the digital literacy of Generation Z to construct alternative religious spaces that may disregard broader social consensus within European societies. The article highlights new intra-Muslim dynamics, heightened tensions within and between communities, and the challenges posed by transnational, digitally mediated forms of authority. The result is a nuanced picture of how digitization reshapes religious pluralism, coexistence, and conflict.

Finally, Stjepan Štivić offers a critical reading of *Neuralink's public campaign* through the lens of religious symbolism. As a prominent actor in brain–computer interface development, Neuralink does not merely promise therapeutic solutions but cultivates a narrative of human enhancement and, ultimately, technological salvation. Štivić shows how the company's communication implicitly appropriates Christian motifs—messianic imagery, healing, transcendence of limitations—to build trust and differentiate itself in a competitive field. The analysis underscores how religious language and symbols are recycled in secular technological marketing, often without explicit theological awareness but with a powerful affective effect.

The Contributions in Detail

Although each article can stand on its own, together they trace a coherent arc.

Žalec's rigorous critique of mind uploading dismantles perhaps the most radical digital dream, thereby grounding the entire issue in a robust philosophy of the body. Globokar and Klun then extend this anthropological insight into theological territory: mortality and bodily finitude are not errors to be corrected by technology but sites where transcendence, vocation, and divine image are encountered. Their contributions jointly resist both reductionist dataism and naïve spiritualization.

Centa Strahovnik and Strahovnik move from ontology to epistemology. By interrogating the status of chatbots as epistemic tools, quasi-partners, or partners, they illuminate new forms of epistemic dependence and co-agency. Their careful analysis of epistemic virtues provides conceptual resources for an ethics of knowledge in AI-saturated environments.

Simonič and Furlan Štante together chart the affective landscape of digital culture. Simonič's focus on empathy reveals how the erosion of bodily co-presence can lead to depersonalized interactions, while Furlan Štante's ecofeminist reading of emotional cyborgs highlights the gendered, ecological, and spiritual dimensions of technologically mediated affect. Both articles warn against a latent commodification

of emotions and call for practices that protect the integrity of embodied, reciprocal feeling.

Platovnjak and Brumec's speculative proposal of a spiritually attuned AI platform bridges inner experience and technological design. Their model neither idolizes AI as a new spiritual authority nor dismisses it as inherently alienating. Instead, they ask how its affordances might be oriented toward listening, resonance, and non-prescriptive accompaniment—offering a distinctive contribution at the intersection of spirituality, psychology, and human–computer interaction.

Prijatelj and Kraner take up two crucial institutional fields—healthcare and education—where AI is already being implemented. Both insist that successful integration depends on preserving the primacy of the human person, understood holistically, and on cultivating professional and moral competencies that technology cannot provide. Their articles are particularly valuable for practitioners seeking conceptual and ethical guidance.

Miklavčič and Zalta offer complementary perspectives on religion in digital culture. Miklavčič uncovers quasi-religious structures in secular practices of digital withdrawal. At the same time, Zalta analyses how specific religious movements, in this case Salafist currents, appropriate digital media to reshape authority and identity. Together, they demonstrate that digitalization neither secularizes nor "retraditionalizes" religion; it reconfigures the terrain in more complex ways.

Štivić's deconstruction of Neuralink's religiously inflected marketing finally reminds us that the language of salvation and transcendence is not confined to explicit religious institutions. It permeates technological imaginaries and can be deployed strategically in the service of market and power interests. A critical theology of technology must therefore be sensitive to these symbolic economies.

Concluding Reflections: Why These Articles Matter

This thematic block shows that questions about digitization and AI cannot be left solely to engineers, economists, and policymakers. They touch on fundamental issues of human identity, community, meaning, and hope—core concerns of philosophy, theology, religious

studies, and the broader humanities. The articles gathered here make at least three original contributions.

First, they articulate a *thick anthropology* for the digital age. Against both reductive dataism and purely instrumental views of technology, the authors insist on the irreducibility of embodiment, vulnerability, and relationality. Whether it is Žalec's critique of mind uploading, Klun's theology of incarnation, Simonič's analysis of empathy, or Prijatelj's account of holistic healing, the message is clear: no fully adequate discourse on AI as a factor of human condition is possible without a nuanced philosophy and theology of the human person.

Second, the issue advances a *refined understanding of religious and spiritual dynamics* in digital culture. Globokar, Platovnjak and Brumec, Miklavčič, Zalta, and Štivić, each in their own way, show how religious categories—mortality and transcendence, the sacred, re-enchantment, salvation—are being reinterpreted, displaced, or instrumentalized in digital environments. This enables a more precise critique of techno-soteriological narratives and a more discerning appreciation of new spiritual searches, whether explicit or implicit.

Third, the block offers *practically oriented frameworks* for key domains such as education and mental health, and more broadly for epistemic and ethical life with AI. Centa Strahovnik and Strahovnik's focus on epistemic virtues, Kraner's reflection on teacher formation, and Prijatelj's emphasis on virtue ethics in mental health all move beyond abstract principles to consider how human agents can live and act reasonably in AI-mediated contexts.

These contributions are of interest not only to a narrow circle of specialists. They speak to teachers wondering how to accompany students who use AI daily; to clinicians navigating digital tools in therapy; to religious leaders discerning how to respond to online radicalization or new forms of spiritual search; to policymakers grappling with the social consequences of platformization; and to all those who sense that something essential is at stake in our relationship with technology. By bringing theological and philosophical perspectives into conversation with psychology, sociology, feminist theory, and cultural studies, this thematic block of *Poligrafi* models the kind of interdisciplinary work that our time urgently requires.

If there is a unifying intuition running through these pages, it is perhaps this: AI and digital technologies are neither neutral instruments nor autonomous destinies. They are woven into the drama of human freedom, vulnerability, sin, and grace. They can intensify alienation and depersonalization, but they can also, when critically appropriated, support new forms of care, learning, and spiritual search. The task of the humanities—and of philosophy and theology in particular—is to help us discern the difference.

Bojan Žalec,
Guest Editor

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF MIND UPLOADING

Bojan Žalec

Introduction[1]

In this article, I address some philosophical questions relating to the idea of uploading the human mind onto a non-biological digital medium,[2] especially its plausibility. MU is supposed to preserve all the essential aspects of the transferred mind, including memories and personality. According to "optimistic" predictions, it is also considered to maintain personal identity and enable immortality. The idea of MU is central to radical transhumanists,[3] who believe that technology can

1 This article was written within the framework of the research project J6-60105 *Theology and digitalisation: anthropological and ethical challenges*, and the research programme P6-0269 *Religion, Ethics, Education and Challenges of Contemporary Society*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

2 In the following, I will use the abbreviation MU to refer to the uploading of the human mind onto a non-biological digital medium.

3 The term "transhumanism" refers to a broad range of positions and efforts. See Newton Lee, ed., *The Transhumanism Handbook* (Cham: Springer, 2019); Amnon H. Eden et al., eds., *Singularity Hypotheses: A Scientific and Philosophical Assessment* (Berlin: Springer, 2013); Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, *On Transhumanism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020); Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, eds., *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014); Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (New York: Doubleday, 2017); Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (Issue Supplement) (2005): 3–14, https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr_2005_26; Nick Bostrom, "The Future of Humanity," in *New Waves in Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jan Kyrre Berg Olsen, Evan Selinger, and Søren Riis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 186–216; Nick Bostrom and Rebecca Roache, "Ethical Issues in Human Enhancement," in *New Waves in Applied Ethics*, ed. Jesper Ryberg, Thomas S. Petersen, and Clark Wolf (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 120–52; Robert Petkovšek, and Bojan Žalec, eds., *Transhumanism as a Challenge for Ethics and Religion* (Vienna and Zürich: Lit, 2021); Wilfried, Sturm, "Transhuman-

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free humans from biological limitations. In this article, I present several arguments against the plausibility of MU. I favor the view that the human mind is inextricably linked to biological, psychological, and social aspects of human existence, which cannot be reproduced on non-biological digital media without losing the mind's identity. The feasibility of MU is questionable in principle, let alone in terms of the plausibility of actual implementation.

MU is a question that is highly relevant to theology and religions,[4] as it touches on key theological issues such as human nature and the nature of the person, immortality, resurrection, and human being as the image of God, e.g. how many copies of the same person can correspond to the image of God, the meaning of the sacraments, and so on. It is undoubtedly in tension with those (religious and theological) views that understand man or the human person as an inseparable unity of mind and body. Therefore, MU needs to be investigated from the perspective of theologies: how can we understand MU from the standpoint of theologies, what interpretations of MU are possible within their horizons, is MU feasible, and is it acceptable in the light of these interpretations? Which questions regarding MU are key or relevant from the perspective of religions and theologies? How can philosophy and other sciences help us with them? In this article, I will focus on philosophical aspects and questions related to MU, which are also important from the perspective of theology and religion.[5]

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ismus und Digitalisierung: Theologisch-anthropologische Perspektiven," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 143, no. 3 (2021): 425–51, https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v143i3.3717; Tristan Samuel Dittrich, "Transhumanistische Glückstreben und christliche Heilshoffnung: Ein Vergleich," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 143, no. 3 (2021): 452–474, https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v143i3.3677; All transhumanists advocate for human enhancement through science, technology, and pharmacology. Their perspectives differ regarding the possibilities and aims of this enhancement. Radical transhumanists believe that we should strive to free humans from all suffering and even death, and that this goal is achievable. The aim of posthumanism, which is a form of transhumanism, is to transcend the human.

4 Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen, *Religion and the Technological Future: An Introduction to Biohacking, Artificial Intelligence, and Transhumanism* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

5 A more detailed discussion of the relevance of MU to (particular) religions is beyond the scope of this article. For an understanding of the broader context of the issue of digitalization and artificial intelligence as challenges for religion, especially from the point of view of the Catholic Church, which is certainly important for a proper understanding of the relevance of MU issue for religions, see Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno trans-

Two Assumptions: Dualism and Functionalism

The idea of MU is based on two assumptions. We can call them the dualism assumption and the functionalism assumption, although we need to be careful using the two terms, since they are used in different senses. The dualistic premise[6] that I have in mind here claims that the human mind is something different from its actual substrate[7] and that it can also be realized on another substrate, which may be of a different substance and fundamentally different in some way. For example, it is not living matter. The dualistic assumption claims that the human mind is something different from and independent of its substrate, even if it cannot exist without any substrate. The human mind is independent of a particular type of substrate, but not of any substrate, of substrates in general. In any case, the human mind and its substrate do not form an inseparable unity.

The term functionalism in the context of the discussion of MU must be understood in the sense in which it is used in the philosophy of mind.[8] The functionalist premise that I have in mind here claims that

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formiranem svetu: Eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop [The Problem of Religious Experience in a Digitally Transformed World: An Existential-Phenomenological Approach]," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2024): 19–32, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun; Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2024): 835–846, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak; Tadej Stegu, "Antropološki izzivi kateheze v času umetne inteligence [Anthropological Challenges of Catechesis in the Age of Artificial Intelligence]," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2024): 909–919, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Stegu; Roman Globokar, "Pogled Katoliške Cerkve na razvoj in uporabo umetne inteligence [The Catholic Church's View on the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence]," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2024): 867–883, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Globokar.

6 For a good overview systematising the various forms of dualism (substantial, property, interactional, etc.) and their philosophical defences and criticisms, see Howard Robinson, "Dualism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, accessed May 4, 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/dualism/.

7 In this article, I always use the term substrate in the sense of a material or physical substrate.

8 The term functionalism is used in the philosophy of mind to cover a diverse range of positions and approaches. See Janet Levin, "Functionalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, accessed May 4, 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/functionalism/; Thomas W. Polger,

the human mind is not essentially dependent on its substrate, but on its structure. This structure can be realized or maintained on a variety of substrates, both biological and non-biological, digital and non-digital. Functionalism can be seen as a complement to dualism. Functionalist ideas and models make dualism tangible and understandable, offering a framework for scientific research and the possibility of confirming dualistic assumptions.

The use of the word dualism is particularly problematic when talking about MU, since most proponents of MU are materialists and therefore, in a sense, ontological monists. This means that they can be described as monistic "dualists," which is, of course, contradictory in a certain sense. However, the point of proponents of MU is not the claim that the human mind is something material or physical, but a certain independence of the mind from its substrate. Dualism concerns the independence of the mind from the substrate, not the (non-)physicality or (non-)materiality of the mind or its substrate. Functionalists, however, add to the thesis of independence that it is its structure that makes the mind independent of its substrate and enables its realization on different bases. Therefore, to avoid terminological misunderstandings, it may be better to speak of the thesis of independence instead of dualism, and of structuralism instead of functionalism, when discussing the position that what essentially determines the mind is its structure, not its substrate. However, there are certainly no ideal terminological solutions, since the terms independence and structuralism are also plagued by the problem of multiple connotations. In addition, in the literature, when talking about both assumptions, we mainly talk about dualism and functionalism, so we will stick to the formulation that the fundamental assumptions of MU are dualism and functionalism. Still, in concrete discussions, it is necessary to know and take into account what form of dualism or functionalism we are talking about. I will do this in the rest of the discussion.

"Functionalism as a Philosophical Theory of the Cognitive Sciences," *WIREs Cognitive Science* 3, no. 3 (May/June 2012): 337–48, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1170; Robert Van Gulick, "Functionalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian McLaughlin, Ansgar Beckermann and Sven Walter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128–151.

As already mentioned, in this article, I am dealing with the philosophical foundations of the idea of MU. Therefore, it is logical that the discussion that follows will mainly revolve around the two aforementioned fundamental assumptions of dualism and functionalism.

Arguments Against MU

We can give five weighty arguments based on different dimensions of human existence:[9] the biological limitations of consciousness, the phenomenological aspect of embodiment, the active perspective of consciousness, the importance of the body model for identity, and the role of the body in our social embeddedness, relationships, and life.

Biological Constraints on Consciousness

Consciousness is based on biological processes such as metabolism, homeostasis, and self-preservation mechanisms. The complex interactions between neurons and synapses in the brain are not simply information processing, but biochemical reactions. There is currently no empirical or scientific evidence that consciousness can exist without biological processes. This is a reasonable basis for concluding that consciousness cannot be imposed on non-biological substrates, because they do not provide the biochemical conditions essential for its emergence and functioning. At this point, John Searle's analogy[10] is relevant: just as a computer simulation of photosynthesis cannot produce sugar, so a simulation of consciousness cannot produce consciousness.

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[9] Georg Gasser, "Leibliche Existenz und die Vision des Mind-Uploading," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 143, no. 3 (2021): 365–87, https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v143i3.3753.

[10] John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3, no. 3 (1980): 424, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00005756.

Phenomenological Aspects of Embodiment: Object Body and Lived Body

It is very important to distinguish between the body as a bare (physical) object, i.e. the object body, and the lived body.[11] Consciousness is inextricably linked to the experience of the lived or phenomenal body, which German phenomenology calls *Leib*[12] (Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Hermann Schmitz), and Merleau-Ponty calls *corps propre,*[13] while in English, the terms "lived body" and "phenomenal body" are used. The lived body is not just a body as an object (German: *Körper* or *Körperding*). It has two dimensions: it is a field of subjective experience and, at the same time, a field of expressions.

The boundaries of our physical body do not limit the lived body. Evidence of this is the phenomenon of the phantom limb, when people, for example, feel pain in a part of their arm or leg that has been amputated. The phantom limb is part of the lived body, not the physical body. In addition, parts of our lived body can include other entities that are not part of our physical body. There is the well-known example of a blind man and his dog's paws, cited by Merleau-Ponty:[14] the paws with which the dog touches the sidewalk on which the blind man walks are part of the blind man's lived body. Osler[15] defends the view that ar-

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11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "The Lived Body," *The Humanistic Psychologist* 18, no. 2 (1990): 115–124, https://doi.org/10.1037/HUM0000150; Tonino Griffero, *Being a Lived Body: From a Neo-Phenomenological Point of View* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023); Shaun Gallagher, "Lived Body and Environment," *Research in Phenomenology* 16, no. 1 (1986): 139–170, https://doi.org/10.1163/156916486X00103; Kevin J. Turner, "Phenomenological Dimensions of Body in the Zhuangzi," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 23 (2024): 609–626, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-024-09959-2; Bojan, Žalec, *Človečnost v digitalni dobi: izzivi umetne inteligence, transhumanizma in genetike [Humanity in the Digital Age: The Challenges of Artificial Intelligence, Transhumanism, and Genetics]* (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta, 2023), 55-59, https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/Zalozba/ZnK86-Zalec-clovecnost_elektronska.pdf.

12 Hermann Schmitz, *Der Leib* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2011), 143ff.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

14 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

15 Lucy Osler, "Taking empathy online," *Inquiry 67*, no. 1 (2021): 302–329, https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1899045.

tifacts such as prostheses and even texts, such as texting on WhatsApp, can also be part of the lived body, which fits nicely into the framework of the extended mind thesis. The lived body is not only a body with which I am causally externally connected, but I experience the lived body directly as something subjectively accessible, which is "present" in perception, feeling, thinking, and acting, and marks my way of being-in-the-world. I can observe my body as a thing among things, and yet my lived body has a special position in relation to me, because I cannot have distance from it, as I do from other things, but I experience and live my body through it. I can put various things aside, but I cannot put my lived body aside: my lived body is always here and never there.[16] It is always "with" me. Thus, the lived body constantly determines our perspective, which is formed through it. However, Merleau-Ponty did not only speak about our body always being here, with us, he even believed that we simply are our lived body.[17]

Our lived body is the "zero point" of our reference.[18] Things can be further from or closer to our lived body, but we can never say, in the subjective space of our lived body, where exactly this point is from which things are more or less distant. Nor can we say of parts of our body that one is closer to us than the other, closer to the zero point of reference. In this sense, we can distinguish between absolute and relative place. Absolute place is only given to us through our lived body, while relative place is a place that is precisely determined according to the frame of reference. Relative place is the place of science, while absolute place is the subjective place of the lived body. Absolute place is directly experienced through lived experiencing (Ger. *Erleben*). The German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz calls the parts of the lived body through which this direct lived experience takes place the islands of the lived body (Ger. *Leibesinseln*).[19] According to Schmitz,

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16 Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*. *Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Freiburg: Herder, 2010).

17 Richard Ottinger, "Körperliche Leiblichkeit als Bedingung der Erfahrungsmöglichkeit von Authentizität: Walter Benjamins Begriff der Aura, (Neue) Phänomenologie und digitale Mediatisierung," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 143, no. 3 (2021): 388–404, https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v143i3.3667.

18 Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*.

19 Schmitz, *Der Leib*.

the corporeal, in the sense of the object body, is that which is spatially relative, and in the sense of the lived body, that which is spatially absolute.[20] Similarly, Schmitz distinguishes between the relative "now" (German: *Jetzt*) and the absolute "now" of man.[21] In this sense, we can distinguish between relative space and time and existential, absolute space and time. Absolute space and time are only formed through constant horizoning by and through our lived body, which also applies to our entire perception.[22] The lived body is constitutive of both our lived space and time and our entire perception, without which the human being-in-the-world (Heidegger) or being-toward-the-world (Merleau-Ponty (Fr. *être au monde*)) is not possible. The same can be said for human consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty claimed, the lived body is not a tool of consciousness, but its fundamental condition. Therefore, consciousness cannot be imposed on a substrate that does not allow the embodiment of the lived body. Finally, the lived body plays an indispensable role in empathy and (thereby) intersubjectivity. Without empathy, our social relationships would be severely limited, and empathy is also crucial for our ethics.[23] For example, the ethical importance of compassion, which is grounded in empathy.

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[20] Ottinger, "Körperliche Leiblichkeit als Bedingung der Erfahrungsmöglichkeit von Authentizität," 398.

[21] *Ibid*., 400–401.

[22] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[23] Susanne Schmetkamp, *Theorien der Empathie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2024), 182–190; Kerstin Krauss, *Ethik der Empathie: Eine Grundlegung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 171–267. This view is opposed by Prinz (Jesse J. Prinz, "Is Empathy Necessary for Morality?," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)), who argues that empathy is not necessary for morality. Empathy can bias moral judgments. Some other emotions are a more reliable basis for morality than empathy. Despite the interesting and imaginative nature of Prinz's argument, I do not agree with him, but a discussion of his views is beyond the scope of this article. For a criticism and refutation of his views, see: Millicent Churcher, "Can Empathy be a Moral Resource? A Smithean Reply to Jesse Prinz," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 55, no. 3 (2016): 429–47, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217316000688; Carme Isern-Mas and Antoni Gomila, "Por qué la empatía es importante para la moralidad?," *Análisis Filosófico* 29, no. 1 (May 2019): 5–26, https://doi.org/10.36446/af.2019.310; Claudia Passos-Ferreira, "In Defense of Empathy: A Response to Prinz," *Abstracta* 8, no. 2 (2015): 31-35, https://doi.org/10.24338/abs-2015.216.

It is challenging to see how a lived body could be uploaded to a digital medium. Ottinger[24] argues that this is not possible, since the digital mediatization of the absolute "here" and "now"[25] is not possible. Calculations as part of research into the possibility of quantum teleportation of the human body also show how far we are from realizing the possibility of uploading the human body to a non-biological digital medium. According to these calculations, the entire human body contains such a vast amount of data that we are currently unable to store it and do not know how to, because all the data centers in the world would not be sufficient. If we were to transfer this amount of data using a 6G network, it would take 700,000 times more than the current age of the universe. So very useless. However, it is true that, given certain data on the pace of progress in the development of data transfer technology, our capabilities could increase significantly relatively soon and we may be able to transfer such an amount of data in 150 years. It is perhaps worth noting that calculating the amount of data contained in the human body does not include, as Professor Boštjan Batagelj from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering at the University of Ljubljana put it, any "essence," "spirit," "soul," or anything similar.[26]

The Active Perspective of Consciousness

Consciousness is not static but is actively oriented toward the world through the lived body. The lived body enables a spatial and temporal perspective that is essential for consciousness. Active interaction with the environment, such as is essential for humanity, is only possible through the lived body. Therefore, MU cannot maintain the active perspective of consciousness, which leads to the loss of its essential characteristics. Consciousness is the result of a dynamic interaction between

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[24] Ottinger, "Körperliche Leiblichkeit als Bedingung der Erfahrungsmöglichkeit von Authentizität," 402–403.

[25] Ottinger uses the terms "absolute here" and "absolute now" in Schmitz's sense, as enabled and "determined" by the lived body.

[26] Teleportacija - znanstvena fantastika ali realnost. Episode of the popular science television series *Ugriznimo znanost*, TV Slovenija 1, December 5, 2024, https://www.rtvslo.si/rtv365/arhiv/175091690?s=tv.

the lived body and the environment, which a non-biological digital medium could not enable.

Identity and Body Model or Image

An individual's identity is based on a specific body model or image that determines what the individual recognizes as their own and others. Changes in the body model affect the sense of identity and can cause a loss of awareness of one's own identity. This awareness is inextricably linked to its physical anchor. Therefore, MU would destroy the continuity of the sense of personal identity, since a change in the substrate would disrupt conscious experience. There is empirical research[27] showing that awareness of what is part of me and what is not, or the distinction between the two, cannot exist without an appropriate body model.

Social Embeddedness of Consciousness, Social and Existential Consequences of MU

MU would have far-reaching consequences for the social and existential aspects of human existence. A change in the physical substrate would radically transform social interaction, identity, and perception of the world. Consciousness is formed through interpersonal relationships that are physically expressed (movement, positioning in interpersonal space, facial expressions, body language, gestures, etc.). Replacing the living substrate with a non-biological digital one would significantly affect the ability for social interaction. The social context is a key part of consciousness and identity. Therefore, MU would severely curtail the social aspects of consciousness, rendering the continuity of an individual's identity impossible to speak of, and negatively affecting the quality of their experience. Human experience, experiencing, and consciousness are embedded, situated, and open to the social environment through the lived body in ways that a non-biological substrate could not provide. This embeddedness significantly determines their quality.

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[27] Helena De Preester, "Technology and the Body: (Im)Possibilities of Re-Embodiment," *Foundations of Science* 16 (2011): 119–37, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-010-9188-5.

Fuchs's Critique of the Possibility of MU

As mentioned above, MU is one of the ideas that are important for radical transhumanism, which promises the liberation of human consciousness from the biological body. It is based on the idea that consciousness can be digitized and uploaded to artificial systems such as computers, androids, or even virtual worlds. This could achieve "immortality" or "infinite" longevity, the elimination of physical limitations, and liberation from the pain and suffering that are inherent in biological existence.

The German psychiatrist and philosopher Thomas Fuchs gave some weighty arguments against MU.[28] Fuchs is one of the world's leading figures in philosophical anthropology in the digital age. He is the main representative of contemporary anthropology and embodied humanism,[29] which provides the broader framework and basis for his rejection of the possibility of MU. Fuchs argues that the idea of MU, although appealing at first glance, is fraught with technical, philosophical, and ethical problems. He criticizes the basic premises on which the concept of MU is grounded. He argues that MU is currently at best science fiction, since the belief in its possibility ignores the fundamental characteristics of the human mind and bodily existence. Fuchs's arguments provide a weighty complement to the arguments against MU presented above.

Technical Limitations

Fuchs points out the technical difficulties that make MU unfeasible today. These obstacles are closely related to the complexity of the human brain and the shortcomings of current technologies. Let me mention three that he cites: 1. The complexity of the human brain: the brain is composed of more than 100 billion neurons and hundreds of trillions of synapses, forming a dynamic and changing network. This

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[28] Thomas Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being: Foundational Questions of an Embodied Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 69ff.

[29] Žalec, *Človečnost v digitalni dobi*.

network is constantly adapting based on experience, environment, and internal processes, which means that precisely mapping it is almost impossible. Fuchs highlights two facts: a) the dynamic nature of neurons: neural connections are subject to constant change and reorganization. Such a dynamic network would be complicated to record technically and would require techniques that do not currently exist; b) the combination of digital and analog signals: while some neural signals can be encoded digitally, many processes operate on the analog level. These include chemical interactions and quantum processes. This means that digital reproductions of the brain would be imperfect. 2. Destructive scanning methods: current methods, such as electron microscopy, allow for precise brain scans, but they are destructive, meaning that the brain would have to die during the process. This contradicts the idea of preserving consciousness. 3. The unidirectionality of current technologies: technologies that enable communication between the brain and computers, for example, to move robotic limbs with thought, work in one direction. Uploading information from computers to the brain, such as "downloading" a new language or skill, remains science fiction. In this context, an important argument against the possibility of MU is the nature of learning: Fuchs emphasizes that neural connections are formed gradually through repeated experiences and physical interaction with the environment. This process is incompatible with the idea of the rapid digital input of knowledge.

Criticism of Functionalism

The functionalism criticized by Fuchs,[30] which could be called computational functionalism,[31] describes consciousness as an algorithm that can be reproduced on a non-biological medium. The biology of the brain is not essential for consciousness. Fuchs criticizes functionalism for, in his opinion, poor simplifications and false assumptions.

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30 Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being*, 4, 24ff, 71–74.

31 Tobias Müller, "Künstliche Intelligenz und menschliches Selbstverständnis. Zu anthropologischen Herausforderungen der Digitalisierung," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie* 143, no. 3 (2021): 359–363, https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v143i3.3749.

Let me mention two objections: 1. Loss of subjective experience: consciousness is not simply the processing of information, but inseparably includes subjective experience. Feelings such as joy, pain, or love are not just data, but complex, sensory, and bodily experiences. Functionalism completely ignores these dimensions and aspects. 2. Searle's "Chinese room":[32] Searle rightly concludes, based on his famous thought experiment, that even if an artificial intelligence system processes data in a way that seemingly shows understanding, this does not mean that it actually understands. The algorithmic processing of symbols is without awareness and understanding of their meaning.

Digital Neutrality

Data and algorithms do not have intrinsic value or qualitative experience in themselves. The feeling of pain or pleasure is not reducible to binary values, as digital systems cannot recreate subjectivity.[33]

The Identity Paradox and the Multiplication of Consciousness

One of the most significant philosophical problems of mind uploading is the question of identity and personal continuity. If consciousness could be uploaded, it would be possible to create multiple copies of the same consciousness. This raises several questions. I can mention two here: 1. Which copy is the "real" one? Each copy could claim to be the original individual, creating an identity paradox. 2. The subjective experience of multiple copies: if multiple copies existed simultaneously, which would be the true bearer of subjective experience? Fuchs uses these questions to illustrate the absurdity of the idea of mind uploading.[34]

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[32] Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs."

[33] Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being*, 73; Mateja Centa Strahovnik, "Identiteta in pogovorni sistemi umetne inteligence [Identity and Conversational Artificial Intelligence]," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2023): 858–864, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Centa.

[34] *Ibid.*, 73.

Neuro-reductionism,[35] the Importance of the Body, and Transhumanism as Technognosticism[36]

Neuro-reductionism is the idea that the brain entirely determines consciousness. Transhumanists often assume that all aspects of personality, emotions, and identity can be reproduced as data structures in the brain. Fuchs rejects this assumption and emphasizes the role of the body: 1. Consciousness as an interaction between the body and the environment: Consciousness is not limited to the brain but involves the entire body and its interaction with the environment. Homeostatic processes such as temperature regulation, hormonal activity, and bodily sensory perception are essential for consciousness. The brain in isolation could not reproduce these dynamic interactions. 2. The embodiment paradigm: Embodiedness means that consciousness only exists in a living body that enables interaction with the environment. The body is not just a vehicle for the brain, but a key enabler of consciousness.

Fuchs, like many others, compares transhumanism to the tradition of Gnosticism, which viewed the body as an obstacle to spiritual "purity." This new Gnosticism could be called technognosticism. Transhumanists, like Gnostics, see the body as a limitation of the mind that must be transcended. "Critiques" of the body include: 1. Contempt for the body: the transhumanist vision expresses contempt for the body, seeing it as "obsolete" and "imperfect." Fuchs, on the other hand, like Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes that the body is not just a vehicle for consciousness, but its foundation; 2. The illusion of immortality:[37] Fuchs is convinced that the idea of digital immortality is an illusion. Consciousness without a body would lose its individuality and sensory dimension, which means that it would become a mere simulation of consciousness. Finally, interventions such as the "elimination" of the body are perilous. Evolutionary processes have created a complex balance that cannot be easily improved without risk.[38]

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35 *Ibid.*, 74ff.
36 *Ibid.*, 2021, 75.
37 *Ibid.*, 2021, 73.
38 *Ibid.*, 2021, 77.

An Integral Assessment of Fuchs's Critique of the Possibility of MU and Its Supplementation

Fuchs's critique is insufficiently substantiated in his critique of functionalism and other places where he repeats or uses his arguments from this critique (the argument from digital neutrality). There is a form of functionalism that understands the mind as a structure that is maintained even when its physical substrate changes. This allows for the possibility that the mind could be maintained even if its physical substrate were to (gradually) change from biological to non-biological. Such functionalism could be called structural functionalism. The structure (of the substrate) is essential for the existence and identity of the mind, not whether it is biological or non-biological.

For some time, functionalism was the mainstream in cognitive science, though some philosophers have rejected it. Among the most famous in this regard are Ned Block and John Searle.[39] Fuchs's "concise" critique of functionalism effectively repeats a well-known argument against it: that it cannot account for phenomenal consciousness, which includes qualitative moments, the so-called qualia (the feeling of red, pain, etc.), and two related moments: the "how-to-be" aspect in the sense of Thomas Nagel ("how to be a bat")[40] and the "first-person perspective" or "being-for-a-subject" (phenomenal consciousness is always consciousness for someone).[41] Fuchs's critique is appropriate for some forms of functionalism, but not for structural functionalism.

As an example of structural functionalism, we can cite Chalmers's view.[42] David J. Chalmers points out that the biological realization of consciousness is not constant but is subject to continuous changes due to metabolic processes. The human organism is not a static structure, but a dynamic system that is in a continuous process of transformation.

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[39] Susan, Blackmore, *Conversations on Consciousness: What the Best Minds Think About the Brain, Free Will, and What It Means to Be Human* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 263.

[40] Thomas, Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October 1974): 435–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914.

[41] Müller, "Künstliche Intelligenz und menschliches Selbstverständnis," 346.

[42] David J. Chalmers, "The Singularity: A Philosophical Analysis," in *Science Fiction and Philosophy: From Time Travel to Superintelligence*, ed. Susan Schneider (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 48.

Nevertheless, it seems that the functional structures of consciousness do not perceive these changes, since the changes are not observable from either the cognitive or the phenomenal point of view. If the qualitative aspects of consciousness were tied to a concrete realization based on carbon, these constant changes should probably affect phenomenal consciousness. However, since we do not observe such an influence in our experience, we can conclude that it does not exist. Therefore, if constant changes to the basic carbon structure of the organism do not affect the phenomenal aspect of consciousness, it is reasonable to assume that even the artificial replacement of these structures would not change consciousness. Even if we do not know precisely how the cognitive and phenomenal aspects of consciousness are related, it seems crucial that the preservation of the functional organization of consciousness is more important than the specific material realization. Chalmers, therefore, argues that the human organism is a dynamic system and that the preservation of the functional organization of consciousness, not the specific material realization, is crucial. Therefore, he allows for the possibility that consciousness could be realized on an artificial, non-biological substrate.

Chalmers's structural functionalism fits nicely with his understanding of consciousness through the concept of information processing. In a conversation with Blackmore, he said:

> My own view is that where you have complex information processing, you find complex consciousness. As the information processing gets simpler and simpler, you find some kind of simpler consciousness.[43]

However, the insufficiency of Fuchs's criticism to reject structural functionalism does not mean that it is reasonable to accept the plausibility of the realization of consciousness on a non-biological substrate. At this point, we can use the reason I have already given, which is shown against the imposition of the mind by Gasser, who claims that we currently do not know of any forms of consciousness that are not realized in living beings.[44] He defines consciousness as a biological phenom-

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[43] Blackmore, *Conversations on Consciousness*, 44.

[44] Gasser, "Leibliche Existenz und die Vision des Mind-Uploading," 371.

enon and justifies his thesis by referring to Aristotle,[45] Thomas Fuchs, Michael Wheeler, Antonio R. Damasio, the biologists Schulze-Makuch and Irwin, Massimo Pigliucci, and John R. Searle.[46]

Schulze-Makuch and Irwin suggest that under terrestrial conditions, the existence of a living being that is not based on carbon is unlikely:

> [N]o comprehensive bioenergetic metabolism is known to arise from non-carbon complex chemistry, despite the high abundance of oxygen and silicon on Earth, and the relative concentration of silicon on other terrestrial planets. Thus, if elements other than carbon constitute the building blocks for any living system on other worlds, they almost surely exist under conditions far different from those on Earth, including temperatures and pressures where water could not be the solvent.[47]

Pigliucci similarly notes that the idea of realizing the mind on artificial substrates is unprovable speculation. Of course, it is possible that somewhere in the infinite universe, there are conditions for consciousness to emerge on a substrate other than carbon. But suppose we focus on what is empirically given to us and what we can specifically scientifically investigate. In that case, it is improbable that consciousness, at least under terrestrial conditions, could be separated from its biological substrate and placed on an artificial medium.[48] Damasio similarly emphasizes that the core of our consciousness lies in the constant, unconscious representation of our internal bodily milieu and is thus intrinsically connected to our biological nature:

> The proto-self is a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions.[49]

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[45] *Ibid*., 372.

[46] *Ibid*., 372–374.

[47] Dirk Schulze-Makuch and Louis N. Irwin, *Life in the Universe. Expectations and Constraints* (Berlin: Springer 2004), 108.

[48] Massimo Pigliucci, "Mind Uploading. A Philosophical Counter-Analysis," in *Intelligence Unbound. The Future of Uploaded and Machine Minds*, ed. Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 119–130.

[49] Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999), 153.

Searle also argues that consciousness is a biological phenomenon:

Whatever else intentionality is, it is a biological phenomenon, and it is as likely to be as causally dependent on the specific biochemistry of its origins as lactation, photosynthesis, or any other biological phenomenon. No one would suppose that we could produce milk and sugar by running a computer simulation of the formal sequences in lactation and photosynthesis. Still, where the mind is concerned, many people are willing to believe in such a miracle because of a deep and abiding dualism: the mind, they suppose, is a matter of formal processes and is independent of quite specific material causes in the way that milk and sugar are not.[50]

On this basis, Gasser concludes, citing Wheeler, that consciousness is a biological phenomenon that is not in conflict with other life processes, but in direct continuity.[51]

Thomas Fuchs argues in the same vein. He claims that the material for a living form must be, in a certain sense, appropriate.[52] He emphasizes that consciousness cannot simply be "attached" to any substrate but must be interpreted as an expression of a living body [Ger. *lebendiger Körper*]. Consciousness is a lived experience that is in relationship with the organism as a whole.[53]

Experience, in whatever degree of consciousness, is always the self-experience of the organism in its actual relation to the environment. It is not a pure mental space or phenomenal tunnel produced inside the brain, but rather a manifestation of the animateness of the organism as a whole.[54]

We find similar thoughts in Fuchs later:

[N]o qualitative experience as such can be derived from data and information. And this is not only because of the irreducibility of 'qualia,' which are discussed in analytic philosophy of mind, but because all experience implies a basic *self-awareness or self-affection*. It is *for me* that I feel joy or warmth,

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50 John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," 424.

51 Gasser, "Leibliche Existenz und die Vision des Mind-Uploading," 372; Michael, Wheeler, "Mind in Life or Life in Mind? Making Sense of Deep Continuity," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 18, 148–167, http://hdl.handle.net/1893/11393.

52 Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being*, 39.

53 Gasser, "Leibliche Existenz und die Vision des Mind-Uploading," 372.

54 Thomas Fuchs, "Feelings of Being Alive: Organic Foundations of Self-Awareness," in *Feelings of Being Alive*, ed. Jörg Fingerhut and Sabine Marienberg (Berlin: Springer, 2012), 162.

perceive, or think. And this self-awareness is not based on reflection or higher-order monitoring of conscious states, nor is it composed of intentional contents or information; rather, it is already present in primary experience, for instance, comfortable, thoughtless dozing in the warm sun. It is a basal *sense of self* that forms the background to all of our experiences, a *feeling of being alive* that springs from our corporeality and which manifests itself in wellbeing or indisposition, specifically in hunger, thirst, pain, or pleasure. From a neurobiological point of view, this background experience requires not only neuronal activities in the brain but vital regulatory processes that involve the entire organism and are integrated in the brain stem and higher centers.[55]

Gasser concludes his argument against functionalism as follows:

> These considerations suggest that the functional reproduction of the biochemical basis of consciousness through other materials is unlikely to be a guarantee for a conscious system, since such a system does not depend on its causal structure, but directly on its material realization. Doubts about the propagated hardware-software model are therefore fully justified.[56]

Our current scientific knowledge and experience suggest that human consciousness is inextricably linked to a material-biological basis and that functional reproduction on artificial substrates would not enable human consciousness.

Fuchs's other arguments against the possibility of MU, apart from his critique of functionalism, are weighty and provide a good basis for concluding that we have no good reasons from a technical or a philosophical point of view for claiming the plausibility of MU. Moreover, MU is also ethically problematic (e.g., the problem of multiple copies). Consciousness is inextricably linked to the body and life, which means that it cannot be reduced to data structures. Instead of rejecting or disregarding the body, we must recognize its crucial and indispensable role in shaping human identity, consciousness, and experience.

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55 Fuchs, *In Defense of the Human Being*, 72.

56 Gasser, "Leibliche Existenz und die Vision des Mind-Uploading," 375.

Conclusion

The plausibility of MU is highly questionable, both scientifically and philosophically. Based on the available evidence, a more reasonable view is that the human mind is fundamentally connected to biological processes, the body or embodiment, and social relations, making it impossible to replicate on non-biological digital platforms. The concept of MU relies on overly simplistic assumptions and ignores vital social and existential aspects of the human mind.

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EXPERIENCING MORTALITY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Roman Globokar

Introduction

The process of digitization brings about tectonic changes for both individuals and social life.[1] The massive use of digital technology is radically changing our interpersonal relationships, work processes, social and political life, and, ultimately, our experience of ourselves.[2] To a certain extent, the very nature of being human is changing. The *conditio humana* does not seem to be the same now, due to the omnipresent and strongly emphasized interaction with digital means. Until now, the awareness of finitude and mortality, the longing for transcendence, and religiosity have been seen as specific characteristics of the human species.

As far as religious life is concerned, many people, at least in the Western world, are noticing that fewer and fewer people are identifying themselves as religious and that sanctuaries are becoming increasingly empty. Some, including Armando Matteo, the current Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, argue that many of today's contemporaries, especially the young, no longer have an antenna

[1] This paper was prepared through the work on the research program *Religion, Ethics, Education and the Challenges of Contemporary Society* (P6-0269) and the project *Theology and Digitalization: Anthropological and Ethical Challenges* (J6-60105), which are co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

[2] David Kraner, "The Internet, the Problem of Socialising Young People, and the Role of Religious Education," *Religions* 14 no. 4 (2023): 1–15, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/4/523.

https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2025.507 | Poligrafi, no. 119/120, vol. 30, 2025, pp. 35–54

for God and for religious messages. The Christian narrative does not resonate with their life experiences and deepest longings.[3] The Jewish historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, who will be discussed at length below, is also convinced that the traditional role of religions is diminishing in digital culture, as the scientific interpretation of the world and secular ethics, along with a general pluralism of opinions and relativism of views, are now dominant. Harari attributes the main authority to algorithms, which are increasingly trusted by humans. Instead of priests, people rely on advice shaped by algorithms. And even for the most fundamental decisions in life, such as choosing a life partner. Large technology companies have therefore replaced the religious structures of the past.[4]

Others are of the opinion that digital culture is more open to transcendence and religiosity than secular culture was, which was based on science, materialism, and immanence. Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek are convinced that technology can mediate and even enhance experiences of transcendence. The technology depends on the reality that we did not create. "We can only grow artificial bladders because nature happens to work in such a way to make this possible... technological power cannot exist without accepting a transcendent order in which one operates."[5] The authors show very illustratively how technical tools can also intensify our wonder and point us toward the sacred and the transcendent: "The microscope does not reduce nature to completely controllable scientific entities, but has rather disclosed a hidden world… More knowledge does not necessarily eradicate the mysteries that surround us, but rather intensifies them."[6] Religion can evolve, in their view, alongside technology, especially through renewed spiritual openness.

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[3] Armando Matteo, *La prima generazione incredula: il difficile rapporto tra i giovani e la fede* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2017), 19.

[4] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: a Brief History of Tomorrow* (Toronto: Signal Books, 2016), 172–181.

[5] Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Transcendence in Technology," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 291–313, https://doi.org/10.5840/techne2015121742.

[6] *Ibid*. 306.

Humans have always longed to go beyond their limits. The experience of transcendence is the experience of something/someone beyond us, beyond our control. It means recognizing our limits and striving to go beyond them. What does the omnipresent context of digital technology mean for our perception of transcendence? On the one hand, it transports us to a parallel, virtual world, where we can, for example, experience things beyond our physical reality with the help of VR tools. On the other hand, it brings much more control over our lives and choices, and makes the world increasingly unified. Algorithms play a crucial role in this, with efficiency being the primary driver. Is it even possible to escape from this total embeddedness in the digitally intertwined context of life? Is this even a legitimate desire, in the sense of preserving certain qualities that we have traditionally attributed to human beings, such as free will, the capacity for empathy, personal responsibility, and the search for transcendence? Are we at a turning point in human history when, as Ray Kurzweil predicted, we are approaching singularity and immortality, which will replace the traditional religious belief in eternity?

First, I will critically evaluate the analysis of the aforementioned Jewish historian Harari on the transition from the *human condition* to the *posthuman condition*, marked by desires for immortality, happiness, and divinity. He also believes that a new religious belief, which he calls *dataism*, is on the horizon. Harari will be counterbalanced by the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas, who opposed the prolongation of human life and advocated for the preservation of the *human condition*, which includes mortality. His philosophy of the organism will also pave the way out of our entrapment in materialist *dataism*. Subjectivity, spirituality, and transcendence cannot be the result of material processes and powerful algorithms, but are endowed foundations of existence over which humanity has no complete authority or control. Jonas' analysis will then lead us to a theological reflection, where we will learn from biblical anthropology the duality of human existence: on the one hand, we are fragile and transient; on the other, we are endowed with an indelible dignity and eternal. Special attention will be paid to the significance of experiencing vulnerability and awareness of mortality in the pursuit of transcendence.

The Challenge of the Posthumanist Desire for Immortality

In his provocative work *Homo Deus* from 2015, Harari stated that the ultimate goal of human endeavor is to conquer death, which will take the human species to the next level. After humanity has reduced mortality from starvation, diseases, violence, and war in recent centuries, new aims are ahead of us, which can be achieved with the help of modern technology. These new ambitions are: immortality, happiness, and divinity. Humans want to upgrade themselves, which Harari defines as the transition from *homo sapiens* to *homo deus*. "In seeking bliss and immortality, humans are in fact trying to upgrade themselves into gods. Not just because these are divine qualities, but because in order to overcome old age and misery, humans will first have to acquire godlike control of their own biological substratum."[7] He makes the bold claim that for modern humans, death is not a metaphysical mystery, but rather a technical problem that can and must be solved. "In the twenty-first century, humans are likely to make a serious bid for immortality."[8] In his mechanistic interpretation, the causes of death are always technical failures, for which we can find technical solutions. These initial statements suggest a reductionist worldview, where the whole is made up of individual particles and the connections between them.

The latest achievements in biotechnology, regenerative medicine, nanotechnology, and AI promise to extend the human lifespan indefinitely. Harari rightly notes that prolonging life will not make people immortal, but potentially a-mortal. They could still die due to war or accident. Therefore, in his view, these people will actually be even more nervous and insecure. "We mortals daily take chances with our lives, because we know they are going to end anyhow. So we go on treks in the Himalayas, swim in the sea, and do many other dangerous things like crossing the street or eating out. But if you believe you can live forever, you would be crazy to gamble on infinity like that."[9]

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7 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 44–45.
8 *Ibid.*, 27.
9 *Ibid.*, 25.

We know that many of the richest people of our time want to be immortal. Ray Kurzweil is convinced that by 2050, we will have reached a level of technological development that will eliminate mortality and make immortality possible.[10] Harari, however, does not share this conviction and warns over-optimists against disappointment: "My own view is that the hopes of eternal youth in the twenty-first century are premature, and whoever takes them too seriously is in for a bitter disappointment. It is not easy to live knowing that you are going to die, but it is even harder to believe in immortality and be proven wrong."[11] This happened to the famous transhumanist FM2030, who believed that science would advance to the point of granting him immortality. He chose the name because he was convinced that by around 2030, all of us humans will have the chance to extend our lives forever. Sadly, he died from pancreatic cancer in 2000, aged 70. He had his body cryopreserved in the hope that science would be able to bring him back to life in the future.[12]

Let us return to Harari's analysis of the human condition today. He argues that *homo sapiens* is changing fundamentally through the process of digitization and that we are one of the last generations of the species. Our desire for happiness and immortality is to upgrade ourselves into gods through three paths, "biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings."[13] The first option is to increase the biological capacity of the organic body, as *homo sapiens* is not the end point of natural evolution. The second is to combine the organic body with inorganic devices to create various forms of *cyborgs*, e.g., by embedding microchips in our bodies. The third option is even more revolutionary, relinquishing control of the brain and allowing inorganic systems to take over the entire system, without the constraints of organic chemistry (*non-organic artificial intelligence*). Harari agrees that we do not know where such developments will lead us and that we

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[10] Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (London: Penguin Books, 2024), 215–216.

[11] Harari, *Homo Deus*, 31.

[12] Abou Farman, "Transhumanism," *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, published 8 September 2022, http://doi.org/10.29164/22transhumanism.

[13] Harari, *Homo Deus*, 45.

cannot imagine the consequences of these changes. "Once technology enables us to re-engineer human minds, *Homo sapiens* will disappear, human history will come to an end and a completely new kind of process will begin, which people like you and me cannot comprehend."[14] Harari is convinced that we want to upgrade our body and mind to escape age and death, but we do not know what new divine possibilities will come with them. The fact is that scientific research and technological progress are advancing much faster than most people can keep up with.[15]

Harari's book *Homo Deus* aims to stimulate the vast population in a provocative way to think about the prediction that in the 21st century, humankind is likely to aim for immortality, bliss, and divinity: "This prediction is less of a prophecy and more a way of discussing our present choices. If the discussion makes us choose differently, so that the prediction is proven wrong, all the better."[16]

Harari believes that technology is already replacing religion in the sense that it provides ultimate authority on truth and meaning, and is gaining more and more trust from people, allowing them to rely on it for their decisions. As mentioned earlier, algorithms are meant to replace religious authorities. Harari notes that a new religion is gradually emerging, which he calls *dataism*. This is the belief that all of reality can be expressed through data. "Dataism says that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing."[17] A very interesting interpretation is that natural algorithms have evolved within humanity over the last 70,000 years, determining human decisions based on biochemical connections. The *dataism* project aims to link these biochemical algorithms with the electronic algorithms that have been developing since the concept of the Turing Machine. Behind all our decisions, therefore, there is supposed to be a very complex network of algorithms that

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14 *Ibid.*, 47.

15 Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Technology as the Elixir of Immortality – Resurgent Philosophical and Spiritual Enigma of Human Imprisonment," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 973–984, http://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Platovnjak.

16 *Ibid.*, 55.

17 *Ibid.*, 326.

operate on either a biochemical or a digital basis and follow exactly the same mathematical laws. Within this view, the barrier between animals and machines has been overcome, a development that Harari believes will lead to the dominance of electronic algorithms in the future. This should also lead to the recognition of a common denominator for all scientific disciplines. "It gives all scientists a common language, builds bridges over academic rifts and easily exports insights across disciplinary borders. Musicologists, political scientists, and cell biologists can finally understand each other."[18] Harari is convinced that the electronic algorithms will undoubtedly be better than biological brains for processing data. Thus, in the future, more and more decisions in human life should be left to computer algorithms, as they can take into account a much larger amount of reliable data and also have greater processing power.

Data integration is becoming a source of unlimited knowledge, which is supposed to lead to the belief that the world's data processing system is omnipotent. Harari compares the religious dimension of *dataism* with traditional religions in this way: "Traditional religions told you that your every word and action was part of some great cosmic plan, and that God watched you every minute and cared about all your thoughts and feelings. Data religion now says that your every word and action is part of the great data flow, that the algorithms are constantly watching you, and that they care about everything you do and feel."[19] This is why people in the digital age are so busy converting their experiences into data. Our experiences have value when they are converted into data and shared in a common data system. "Dataism adopts a strictly functional approach to humanity, appraising the value of human experiences according to their function in data-processing mechanisms. If we develop an algorithm that fulfills the same function better, human experiences will lose their value. Thus, if we can replace not just taxi drivers and doctors but also lawyers, poets, and musicians with

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*, 342.

superior computer programs, why should we care if these programs have no consciousness and no subjective experiences?"[20]

After this provocative analysis by Harari, the question arises whether we are doomed to *dataism*. Are algorithms really going to shape our lives in the future? Is it really the end of *homo sapiens* and are we in a phase of transition to a new form of life? And after all, is not the fundamental claim that "the universe consists of data flows" actually metaphysical, or even religious in nature? This claim cannot be proven on a material basis, but is a philosophical or religious assumption of such a belief. Our most significant criticism of *dataism* is that it cannot be verified by dataistic elements, but instead assumes the truthfulness of the presupposition that all reality is composed of data.[21] However, as I will try to show below, we can reasonably doubt the validity of such an assumption. *Dataism* is another in a series of reductionist views of reality that exclude the realms of subjectivity, consciousness, and transcendence.

However, we agree with Harari that we are at a turning point and that the choices we make today influence the lives of future generations to a much greater extent than in the past. The Italian theologian Paolo Benanti also suggests that the last generation of humanity as we have known it is coming, and that the future of the human species and the planet will depend on the choices made by this generation. He speaks about a change of epoch: "the new epoch is characterized by new human attitudes to facing the finitude and radicality of human existence, by new deep and vital values that animate humans to think, feel, and act"[22]. He calls this last generation *Omega*, and the new world "a synthetic world."[23] Generation Omega will no longer be able to postpone three key issues: the relationship of humanity to the environment, the relationship of humanity to technology, and the relationship of humanity to itself.

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[20] *Ibid*., 344.

[21] Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu: eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 1 (2024): 24, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun.

[22] Paolo Benanti, *Digital Age: Teoria del cambio d'epoca: Persona, famiglia e società* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo Edizioni, 2020), 186.

[23] *Ibid*., 187.

In responding to the mentioned challenges, I find the reflection of the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) on mortality as a burden and a blessing for human beings still relevant. His existential analysis of being, which originates from the experience of a living organism, also enables us to confront the challenges of *dataism*.

Jonas's Understanding of Mortality as a Precondition for Life

Jonas states that mortal humans have always longed to escape death and cherished the hope of eternal life. He is convinced that humans are the only living beings who know that they will die, who mourn their dead, and bury them. For him, the grave is one of the symbols that mark the specificity of humans in relation to other living beings.[24]

For Jonas, mortality is "an essential attribute of life as such."[25] The basic structure of every living being is a constant exposure to death. Death is always on the horizon of the existence of every living being. Death and life presuppose and make each other possible. Without death, there is no new life. For Jonas, the living organism is a paradigm of being that presupposes for its existence a constant exchange of matter and the *freedom* of the subject. For Jonas, all living beings (including plants and animals) have a certain degree of freedom. Every living being must constantly exchange matter with its environment because the parts of it that consist of matter are perishable. Nevertheless, it maintains its identity precisely through this constant passage of foreign matter. The material identity, therefore, does not coincide with the identity of the living being. "It is the same never materially and yet persists as its same self *by* not remaining the same matter."[26] This is why the phenomenon of organic life does not correspond to the mathematical-mechanical worldview, because the teleological endeavor of the organism cannot be

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[24] Hans Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1992), 34–49.

[25] Hans Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," *The Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 1 (1992), 34.

[26] Hans Jonas, *The phenomenon of life: toward a philosophical biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 76.

reduced to a mechanical causality. According to Jonas, the appearance of life represents "an ontological revolution in the history of 'matter'."[27]

Compared to inorganic things, living beings have an active role in maintaining their existence. "Organisms are entities whose being is their own doing. … being for them consists in doing what they have to do in order to go on to be."[28] For Jonas, the living body therefore has a paradoxical character: on the one hand, it is "a composite of matter", on the other hand, it "is not identical with this or any such simultaneous total, as this is forever vanishing downstream in the flow of exchange."[29]. A living being is distinct from the matter of which it is composed and is not merely the sum of that matter. Jonas argues that every living being has a certain amount of *freedom* that allows it to maintain its identity over time. Life affirms itself and considers its existence as something worthwhile. "Continued metabolism is such a reclaiming, which ever reasserts the value of Being against its lapsing into nothingness. Indeed to say yes, so it seems, requires the co-presence of the alternative to which to say no."[30]

Jonas states that the aging process is not characteristic of all living beings; however, it is characteristic of all warm-blooded animals, which leads him to believe that it is an evolutionary advantage, otherwise, this development would not have occurred. Jonas reflects on the general evolutionary aspect of death and dying. Evolution itself presupposes the finitude of individual life, since the principle of survival is based on "the use of death for the promotion of novelty."[31] This involves "a mixture of death extrinsic causes (foremost the merciless feeding of life on life) and the organically programmed dying of parent generations to make room for their offspring."[32] With the emergence of humans, another form of mortality began to prevail. Although mortality is, on the one hand, a burden and brings the fear of death into life, Jonas also sees it as a blessing. He wonders whether it is right and meaningful

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27 *Ibid.*, 81.
28 Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," 34.
29 *Ibid.*, 35.
30 *Ibid.*, 36.
31 *Ibid.*, 37.
32 *Ibid.*

to eliminate death and prolong human life indefinitely. He elaborates arguments from a social and ecological perspective, as well as from the point of view of personal satisfaction.

From a social perspective, Jonas points out that new births are conditioned by the death of the previous generation. A general prolongation of life would lead to the abolition of reproduction. In fact, we see that in societies where the population is aging, there are fewer and fewer births. Jonas presents a black scenario of a boring world "of old age with no youth."[33] Everyone already knows each other, and the element of surprise when new people appear is lost. In contrast, he emphasizes the value of youth and the renewal of life. He refers to Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality,"[34] which is as essential an attribute of the human condition as mortality. Natality means the ability of a person always to start anew, to see the world in a new way, with their own eyes, to begin where they came from. This happens in a very concrete way with the actual birth of a new child, which is why childbirth is essential for the existence and development of society. "Youth, with its fumbling and follies, its eagerness and questioning, is the eternal hope of mankind. Without its constant arrival, the wellspring of novelty would dry up, for those grown older have found their answers and gotten set in their ways. The ever-renewed beginning, which can only be had at the price of ever-repeated ending, is mankind's safeguard against lapsing into boredom and routine, its chance of retaining the spontaneity of life."[35] Every newborn is unique and unrepeatable, not just a repetition of their ancestors, but a completely new and surprising combination. This natality is made possible by mortality, or, as Jonas writes, "the dying of the old makes place for the young."[36]

Jonas adds another argument against prolonging human life, namely, in terms of ecological responsibility. At a time when many are talking about the overpopulation of our planet, it would be even more irresponsible to seek solutions by prolonging human life. As he has shown,

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[33] Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: in search of an ethics for the technological age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19.
[34] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11.
[35] Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," 39.
[36] *Ibid*.

we need young people for society to develop creatively in the future; therefore, it is ethically responsible to reject projects that extend human life. Jonas links mortality and creativity in human history and thus sees mortality as a blessing rather than a curse.

However, mortality is also a blessing for the individual. We know that many people today want to become immortal. They might acknowledge that society needs new children to be born, but they, as individuals, will allow themselves to live indefinitely, to be the exception to the natural rule. Would an unlimited life be desirable if we could live in a state of eternal youth, without the ailments and difficulties of old age? Jonas is convinced that the answer is no, even from a purely selfish point of view. Even if medical advances enable our cells to rejuvenate, our life history will still accumulate, raising the question of our brain's capacity to remember and process all this information. "Old age, in humans, means a long past, which the *mind* must accommodate in its present as the substratum of personal identity. The past in us grows all the time, with its load of knowledge and opinion and emotions and choices and acquired aptitudes and habits and, of course, things upon things remembered or somehow recorded even if forgotten."[37] Jonas is convinced that the capacities of our brains are limited and that humans do not have the power to erase old content from their consciousness and memory, and thus create new space. In his view, unlimited human existence is only possible at the cost of "either losing the past and with it our real identity, or living only in the past and therefore without a real present."[38] We would most likely live in an anachronistic world where we would not understand the innovations created by new generations.

Jonas is convinced that, even from an individual's point of view, mortality is above all a blessing, though of course, he does not mean that human death should be hastened. "It is a duty of civilization to combat premature death among humankind worldwide and in all its causes—hunger, disease, war, and so on."[39] Awareness of the finiteness of our existence encourages us to give meaning and significance to the

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37 *Ibid.*, 40.
38 *Ibid.*
39 *Ibid.*

days we have been given. Jonas invites his readers to reflect on *memento mori* or the sentence from Psalm 90: "Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom," rather than striving for an infinite prolongation of life. "Perhaps a nonnegotiable limit to our expected time is necessary for each of us as the incentive to number our days and make them count."[40]

Theological Reflection

In the third part of our paper, I will follow the fundamental conclusion of Jonas's philosophy of the organism, that the phenomenon of life cannot be explained in a materialistic way, that life is therefore not the result of complex material processes in nature, but that it is the inner principle of freedom or subjectivity that gives the living being the identity to establish its being. In applying Jonas's philosophical biology to contemporary debates in the field of digital technology and artificial intelligence, we can establish a strong skepticism about the possible emergence of consciousness and subjectivity from complex algorithms. Mere causality cannot explain the emergence of consciousness and subjectivity. Branko Klun, like Hans Jonas, starts from an existential-phenomenological understanding of being and comes to the following conclusion: "Man continues to live his life from an 'inner' perspective, which in an inextricable interconnectedness includes his embodiedness (physicality), his manifold feelings (emotionality), his interpersonal relations (sociality) and, of course, his reason (intellectuality), which is not limited to the narrow rationality of logical processes. (...) Our primary experience of life and the life-world associated with it thus remains open to the experience of passivity, to the experience of givens that elude our control—to the unpredictable and unexpected events that enable us to grasp in a holistic way what is meant by the word 'gift'."[41] Within the experience of a life-world beyond the merely manageable world, a genuine experience of transcendence can take place.

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[40] Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility,* 19.

[41] Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu," 31.

The experience of life is about being in relationships, being dependent on others, and at the same time being attuned beyond oneself. "Life is essentially relatedness to something, and relationship as such implies a 'transcendence', a referring beyond oneself from the part of that which maintains the relationship."[42] It is the lived body that enables an individual living being to be in the world, in exchange with the world, and at a distance from the world. Humans are relational beings within their embodiment.[43] The body gives them individuality and sets boundaries in relation to their surroundings.[44] The body allows us to be at once connected and detached. It is a characteristic of human existence that we have the freedom to go beyond the given: from the finite to the infinite, from the temporal to the eternal, from the conditional to the unconditional. Jonas writes: "The very idea of being able to grasp the infinite, the eternal, the absolute, as even the youthful mind, which is only just trying, is an indication of this transcendent freedom of the mind, which its own Eros drives."[45]

At the starting point of our discussion, we saw how humans in the digital age aspire to immortality and divinity, but seek to achieve this without death and salvation (or a Savior). People want to be the creators of a new project that, through digital technology, would prolong human life indefinitely. As I have already pointed out, such a project is based on the tacit metaphysical assumption that the whole of reality is a mere collection and intersection of data and that it is possible to create a new world governed by sophisticated algorithms. Finally, I would like to add some theological reflections to the largely philosophical discussion so far. I believe that authentic transcendence cannot be achieved through digital technology, but only through an embodied, vulnerable, and mortal existence. I base this position on the assumption that the inner experience of subjectivity is only possible within an embodied

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42 Hans Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit: Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 16.

43 Bojan Žalec, *Človečnost v digitalni dobi: izzivi umetne inteligence, transhumanizma in genetike* (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta, 2023), 15, https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/Zalozba/ZnK86-Zalec-clovecnost_elektronska.pdf

44 *Ibid*., 54–60.

45 Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 223.

and transient being. It is an experience that I cannot master or control, but that is essentially given to me. In fact, it is a fundamental religious experience.

For a more in-depth theological analysis, I will focus on the first three chapters of Genesis, which present in a symbolic way a holistic view of humans and their fundamental existential questions, including the question of the origin of death and evil in this world. The biblical view of the human consists of two basic components: first, the human is a created being, one of the created beings, fragile, vulnerable, transient, finite, and mortal; at the same time, the human is made in the image of God, which gives a special dignity, holiness, infinity, and eternity.[46] Human existence takes place within this tension, which has also been expressed through the Christian tradition in the spiritual dynamic between *imago* (image of God) as the ultimate vocation and *similitudo* (likeness of God) as the dynamic process of realizing one's life in accordance with one's vocation to live as God's image. "The dignity that results from being made in the image of God must prove itself on his path to Godlikeness by acting responsibly in his relationships."[47] What man being created in God's image means is not precisely explained in the Bible. Throughout the history of theology, the attributes of God's image have been identified as reason, free will, dominion over creation, relationality, and love. But it is undoubtedly connected to the special place human beings have in creation. "This creature is unlike others, and is intended to rule and have dominion over the whole. It is therefore appropriate that God, the sovereign Creator of the universe, has in a sense replicated himself in creating this unique creature, the human."[48]

God created man and woman in His image and commissioned them to participate in the creation process. In the first creation narrative in the Bible (Gen 1:1–2:3), God does not act as a self-sufficient Creator,

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[46] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 4 (2024): 835–846, http://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak.

[47] Andreas Büsch, "Das Geschöpf im Netz: Auf der Suche nach dem digitalem Selbst," in *Theologie und Digitalität: Ein Kompendium*, ed. Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, and Joachim Valentin (Freiburg: Herder, 2021), 202.

[48] Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

but invites his created beings to continue his work on their own. He invites the earth to put forth vegetation, plants, and fruit trees; he commands the birds and the fish to multiply and be fruitful. The same happened in the creation of land animals; God invited the earth to bring forth living creatures of every kind. But when God created humanity, his act was something special. "Rather than create by simple *fiat* or through surrogates such as earth or water, God himself decisively steps in to make humankind."[49] As God's image, human beings receive a creative spirit and, with the help of reason and the ability to make free choices, intervene in their environment and change it. Human activity is therefore part of the creation process, so we can also understand the rapid technological developments in the field of digitization within this paradigm.

A more complete picture of humanity's place in creation is given by considering the second creation account (Gen 2:4–25), which emphasizes humanity's connection to the earth from which they are taken, suggesting frailty and transience. It is clearly implied that God breathed into people a spirit (Gen 2:7), which means that his spiritual dimension is not a product of the material world. Nor is it a dualistic view of humans, where one could distinguish between body and spirit, but the whole person is made a "living being" by the breath of God. In an illustrative way, Arnold explains: "The 'living being' is not some disembodied component of the human being, distinct from his physical existence; a 'soul' comprising one portion of a person's whole being. Rather the 'living being' denotes the totality of the human."[50]

The human is placed in the garden with the specific task of being a gardener "to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15), which means a mission to creatively transform the given world, while at the same time maintaining order and harmony in creation. Of particular interest for our topic, however, are the two trees mentioned in the narrative (Gen 2:9). The tree of life represented divine power, perhaps an unnatural prolongation of life, or even immortality, which is hinted at in Gen 3:22. Alongside this tree of life in the garden, there is also "the tree of the knowledge of good

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[49] Arnold, *Genesis*, 42–44.
[50] *Ibid.*, 58.

and evil," which God forbids people to eat from. "The one requirement for maintaining the equilibrium of peace and tranquility in the garden of Paradise, indeed for maintaining life itself, was the willingness to hear God's command to stay away from a single tree."[51] People are given the freedom to order the world in their own way, but must also respect the limits God gives. We know that Gen 3 describes how man broke God's command and lost his Edenic state. And the following chapters (Gen 4–9) show how people have abused the various acquisitions of their spirit, thereby destroying the fundamental relationships with other people, nature, the self, and God. "Technologically assisted domination without relationship to God, nature and one another is presented as a sure road to disaster."[52]

The good news from the first pages of the Bible is that God does not leave humans alone, but comes to them after every misuse of the gifts and rupture of the relationships with a redemptive act that helps them to live out their humanity. Even the expulsion from paradise, which seems like a curse, enables humans to accept their limitations and vulnerability, allowing them to have loving and responsible relationships. I share Arnold's thesis on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden: "To be sure, God resolutely throws them out and locks the door behind them. But in so doing, God is also protecting humans from overreaching their grasp, almost as though God is ensuring their continuing humanity as opposed to a lesser option—that of becoming trapped in immortality."[53]

Mortality is, therefore, a blessing for humans because it confronts them with the responsibility of realizing their Godlikeness within a limited time. "Mortality should not be understood as a transition to 'nothingness', but as the loss of all the masks, camouflages, images and forms of protection that characterize our existence."[54] Mortality indicates our

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[51] *Ibid*., 59.

[52] AI Research Group for the Center for Digital Culture of the Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See, *Encountering Artificial Intelligence: Ethical and Anthropological Investigations* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2024), 50.

[53] Arnold, *Genesis*, 72.

[54] Kurt Appel, "The Price of Prayer," in *In Praise of Mortality: Christianity and New Humanism,* ed. Kurt Appel (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022), 173.

uniqueness and irreplaceability. The first chapters of the Bible are intended to help humans recognize and accept their role in this world and to be aware of their fragility, limitations, and transience. "It is part of human existence that a person is fallible. One cannot be a human being other than a fallible human being."[55]

The fundamental temptation of humanity to "be like God" (Gen 3:5) returns in a new guise in the digital age. As Harari says, *homo sapiens* wants to become *homo deus*. But I do not find the label *homo deus* appropriate. Perhaps *homo technologicus* would be more suitable, because this is about boosting human capabilities through modern technology, not about truly achieving God's transcendence. Harari himself suggests that the divinity that humans yearn for in the digital age is more akin to the divinity of the Greek gods or Hindu devas than to the divinity of the God of monotheistic religions.[56] In our view, it is the authentic experience of transcendence, which is uncontrolled and unavailable, that enables people today to avoid succumbing to the dangers of data totalitarianism. In this respect, I agree with Valentin, who argues that theological content is particularly relevant for facing contemporary digital challenges: "The mysterious character of God and his personality, a clear acknowledgment of human corporeality and thus defectiveness, temporality and mortality as well as imperfect, unpredictable communication are obviously more 'of the time' and should be actively introduced into a public debate on humanism, ideology and digitalization more than is currently considered appropriate within the Church and theology."[57]

Karl Rahner, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, repeatedly emphasized the mystery and unavailability of God. Humanity, being finite and transient, can never determine who the infinite God is. "The infinite horizon, which is the term of transcendence and which opens us to unlimited possibilities of encountering this or that particular

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55 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 277.

56 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 47–48.

57 Joachim Valentin, "Versprechen der Digitalisierung und Verheißungen Gottes," in *Theologie und Digitalität: Ein Kompendium*, ed. Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, and Joachim Valentin (Freiburg: Herder, 2021), 367

thing, cannot itself be given a name."[58] The finite person cannot dispose of an infinite God, but the perception of transcendence happens precisely because of the experience of finitude: "In its very constitution a finite spirit always experiences itself as having its origins in another and as being given to itself from another—from another, therefore, which it cannot misinterpret as an impersonal principle."[59]

I believe that the experience of transcendence is not the result of complex connections or intertwining of data, but of the real existence of Someone who, while connected to this world, also infinitely transcends it. God is not one of the elements, but the One who is at once in everything and at the same time beyond everything.

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[58] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 61.

[59] *Ibid.*, 75.

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CHRISTIAN INCARNATION IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL DISEMBODIMENT

Branko Klun

Introductory Phenomenological Remarks: Consciousness and Embodiment

In order to withstand the reduction of human existence to either metaphysical dualism or materialist monism, we should return to our lived experience and its phenomenological analysis.[1] The dominance of natural science and its empirical methods has led many to regard the classical distinction between mind and body as obsolete. Terms such as mind, soul, or spirit are now often treated as metaphors for what are considered complex but ultimately material processes of the brain. Yet this shift fails to fully account for the persistence and necessity of concepts like *psyche*, which continue to denote a dimension of human life that is not easily assimilated into purely physical categories. Even within scientific contexts, we speak of psychic and somatic suffering, or of psychosomatic illnesses—indicating that the distinction between body and consciousness, while perhaps ontologically awkward for a materialist worldview, remains experientially unavoidable.

This enduring distinction reflects a basic structure of human existence: namely, that we are beings capable of self-awareness and reflection.

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In becoming conscious of ourselves, we do not merely register bodily sensations; we introduce a distance from our own corporeality. To be aware of one's body implies that consciousness is not identical to it, but operates in a different mode of being. Still, this is not claiming separation in the Cartesian sense. We live both as body and as consciousness, and our existence unfolds within the dynamic interplay of these two dimensions. Phenomenologically, this duality becomes evident in the structure of intentionality: consciousness always transcends the body's immediate physical situation.[2] When I look at a tree, I am perceptually "with" the tree, even though my body remains here; when I think about tomorrow, I am "in" the future, while my body remains in the present. Consciousness thus shows itself as capable of spatial and temporal transcendence, revealing a deeper complexity in our mode of being-in-the-world.

The philosophical temptation has often been to resolve this complexity through reduction. Classical dualism, as found in Plato and Descartes, posits the soul or thinking self as the true seat of personhood, relegating the body to a merely instrumental role. In these frameworks, the soul is immortal and fundamentally distinct from the body, which only serves as its temporary vessel. This dualism strongly influenced strands of Christian theology, despite its tension with the biblical emphasis on the unity of the body and soul. In contrast, modern naturalism tends toward a reductive monism: everything that exists is understood as part of nature and therefore subject to empirical investigation. From this perspective, consciousness is simply brain activity—a highly complex but ultimately explainable process. References to the soul or spirit are thus dismissed as outdated metaphors with no ontological substance.

Phenomenology offers a third way. Rather than beginning with abstract ontological commitments, it begins with the description of experience as it is lived. In this light, no conscious act is ever entirely disembodied. Even abstract thought is rooted in affective, perceptual,

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[2] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 158–161.

and sensory engagement with the world. We always think, feel, speak, and act from within an embodied perspective. This insight is captured in the phenomenological distinction between "I am my body" and "I have a body." On the one hand, the body is the locus of subjectivity: when someone touches my hand, they touch me; when I cry, it is not simply my eyes that produce tears—it is I who cries. The body is not an external appendage but integral to myself. On the other hand, we can also relate to our bodies with a certain detachment: I can observe or describe my body, feel estranged from it when it "falls asleep," or experience disruptions of body-image as in anorexia. Aging may impose limits on my body, and with it, a painful restriction of freedom.

This tension between immediacy and reflection, between embodiment and awareness, marks the body as something more than an object and yet never fully identical with the self. Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh" (la *chair*) captures this ambiguity:[3] the body is neither purely subject nor object, but a site of intertwining between self and world. Human existence thus appears as unity-in-difference: we are embodied subjects, already situated in a world, yet capable of stepping back, reflecting, and projecting beyond our physical confines.

Within this framework, the body cannot be reduced to a mere instrument of the self, as instrumentalist interpretations suggest. Rather, it is the necessary *mediator* of our openness to the world.[4] It is only through the body that we perceive, feel, speak, and act. As a mediator, the body does not obscure or stand between the self and the world; rather, it is the condition for any relationship with the world at all. Subjectivity is always expressed and enacted in an embodied way.[5] Likewise, our encounter with another's body is never merely a perception of external form but a direct experience of the other person: they disclose themselves to us through their embodied presence.

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[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147–148.

[4] Günther Pöltner, *Grundkurs Medizin-Ethik*, 2nd ed. (Wien: Facultas Universitätsverlag, 2006), 63–75.

[5] Thomas Fuchs, "The Circularity of the Embodied Mind," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, no. 1707 (2020): 2–3, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01707.

Digital Reduction and Digital "Metaphysics"

Digital culture is shaped by the pervasive influence of technologies rooted in modern scientific thinking. At the heart of this thinking lies a technical-mathematical framework that seeks to reduce all phenomena to quantifiable, computable terms. From this perspective, knowledge is attained by formalizing, measuring, and ultimately controlling nature. Unlike premodern modes of relating to the world—which were grounded in embodied experience, using lived metrics such as steps, fingers, or seasons—modern science replaces this lifeworld orientation with abstract, standardized measurements and technical reasoning.[6] Sensory experience, once central to human understanding, is now viewed with suspicion, eclipsed by the abstract intellect. When science asserts, for instance, that the Earth orbits the Sun—contrary to what our senses suggest—it affirms a new hierarchy of truth: one that privileges calculation over embodied perception.[7]

This elevation of pure reason over sensory-bodily experience is particularly evident in mathematics, which appears to operate independently of any material or corporeal basis. When we grasp that 2 + 3 = 5, we seem to access a realm of truth unmediated by the body—a purely mental, or even spiritual, insight. This was the intuition that led Plato to posit the realm of immaterial ideas or forms, eternal truths untouched by the flux of the physical world. In some respects, these Platonic forms prefigure the contemporary notion of information, which also aspires to immateriality, permanence, and universal intelligibility.[8]

Modern science, especially in its most advanced forms—physics, biology, and computer science—increasingly regards information as the

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[6] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 48–53.

[7] Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 116–17.

[8] Luciano Floridi, *Information: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14–18.

basic fabric of reality. Instead of material atoms, it sees systems of data, codes, and programs. In this shift, some have drawn connections to the ancient *logos*, reinterpreted as the structuring principle of the universe. Martin Heidegger interpreted modern science as a deepening of this metaphysical trajectory, one that further entrenches the supremacy of disembodied, formal knowledge and reduces the world—including the human being—to what can be calculated and controlled.[9]

Digital technology represents the culmination of this movement. It reduces all phenomena to binary code—a sequence of 1s and 0s—thereby transforming them into manipulable data. The Latin word *digitus*, meaning finger, ironically names the system that now abstracts away from bodily experience. Light, sound, and movement—once experienced through the senses—are now stored and processed as digital inscriptions. These inscriptions, while dependent on physical media, present themselves as immaterial information, capable of infinite replication and transmission. Information, in this sense, resembles the Platonic idea: it is abstract and enduring, yet paradoxically tethered to material substrates that it cannot fully escape from.

What emerges is a kind of digital metaphysics, in which the world is understood as fully translatable into information. Information comes to function as a new metaphysical absolute with attributed qualities once reserved for the divine: immateriality, omnipresence, durability, and self-replication.[10] In this context, a new dualism arises—one that reaffirms the mind as the locus of human identity and sees the body as a fragile, inefficient instrument to be optimized or overcome. The ideology of transhumanism builds upon this view, envisioning a future in which the limitations of the body are transcended through technology. Figures such as Ray Kurzweil exemplify this ambition, suggesting that while the body is destined to decay, the mind—conceived as pure information—can be preserved and uploaded to achieve a form of digital

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[9] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 134–35.

[10] Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 41–45.

immortality.[11] Or with the witty remark by Johannes Hepp: "The digital soul does not go to heaven, but to the cloud."[12]

Transforming the Body in Digital Culture

Contrary to the idea that digital culture displaces or diminishes the body, one could argue that it actually intensifies the body's presence, sometimes to the point of fetishization. Yet this apparent valorization of the body does not negate the digital metaphysics previously discussed; rather, it complements it. What we now witness is not the return of the body in its lived, existential fullness, but its transformation into an object of information. The body becomes image, data, a construct shaped by and for the digital gaze.

This gaze—technologically and socially mediated—does not simply observe the biological body but evaluates, categorizes, and aestheticizes it. The objectified body is no longer just a medical or anatomical entity; it is a cultural artifact continually shaped by ideals that circulate as visual and conceptual norms within digital media.[13] These ideals function as templates or informational schemata—standards that we are invited, or compelled, to emulate. As a result, the lived body—the pre-reflective, affective ground of experience[14]—is increasingly subordinated to the task of optimizing its digital representation. Physical training, cosmetic alteration, and even technological enhancement are means by which individuals seek to align their embodied selves with the ideals encoded in the image economy of digital culture.

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[11] Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005), 324–29. For more on the topic of superintelligence, see Bojan Žalec, "Človeški podobna umetna inteligenca in superinteligenca: verjetnost in glavne težave njunega oblikovanja [Human-like Artificial Intelligence and Superintelligence: The Probability and Main Challenges of Their Design]," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 4 (2024): 757-758, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Zalec.

[12] Johannes Hepp, *Die Psyche des Homo Digitalis. 21 Neurosen, die uns im 21. Jahrhundert herausfordern*, e-version (München: Kösel, 2022), 244.

[13] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 153–58.

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 93–95.

This dynamic creates a paradox: while the cultural obsession with the body intensifies, it is not the body as it is lived and experienced that is celebrated, but its representation, its idealized image. The body becomes a project, something to be sculpted for visual validation rather than inhabited as the medium of one's being. Meanwhile, the lived body persists quietly beneath these representations, reminding us of its primacy by fatigue, illness, aging,[15] and the unglamorous rhythms of everyday life. It is in these moments, when the body is no longer compliant or remains in the background, that the limits of the digital image become visible, and the irreducibility of embodied life asserts itself.

Even the most immersive digital experiences depend on this underlying corporeality. Anders Hougaard's concept of *hyperembodiment*[16] captures a related phenomenon: the intensification of sensory input through digital media that seems to enhance our sense of being-in-the-body. Building on Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality,[17] Hougaard suggests that digital experiences do not simply replicate the real—they amplify it, offering stimulations that exceed the natural capacity of our senses. Paradoxically, this can produce a feeling of heightened embodiment that is nonetheless technologically mediated.

This hyperembodiment exists alongside, and perhaps depends upon, a counter-movement of *disembodiment*. As Hubert Dreyfus has argued, digital environments often entail a loss of authentic, situated presence.[18] Online interaction tends to abstract us from the concrete here-and-now, replacing embodied engagement with virtual proximity. A vivid example is internet pornography: while it overwhelms us with visual stimuli, it simultaneously distances the viewer from any reciprocal bodily encounter. The body is thus rendered hyper-stimulated yet absent—intensely addressed but fundamentally displaced. In this tension between amplification and alienation, digital culture reshapes our

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15 Pöltner, *Grundkurs Medizin-Ethik*, 65–67.

16 Anders Hougaard, *Hyperembodiment: Technological Mediation and the Lived Body* (Copenhagen: MedieKultur, 2020), 45–48.

17 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–6.

18 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3–6, 103–07.

bodily existence in ways that demand renewed reflection on what it means to be an embodied subject.

The Inability to Forget the Body and the Alienation of the Digital Human

Though it may seem that digital immersion leads to bodily detachment, this is ultimately an illusion. The body remains inescapable, even if we can momentarily "forget" it. Moments of deep absorption—being drawn into a film or immersed in music—illustrate consciousness's capacity to direct itself outward, a reflection of its intentional structure. In such states, consciousness is ec-static: it "stands outside" itself by being directed toward something else, spatially or temporally. Yet even in these outward movements, we never fully leave the body. A prereflective self-affection—an awareness of being a bodily self—persists beneath every act of attention.

Intentional consciousness cannot sever itself from embodiment; it is through the body that intention is even possible. The body is not a passive container for consciousness but its enabling condition. It sustains every act of awareness and grounds every experience. Thus, digital life does not free us from the body—it only risks distorting our relation to it. In this distortion lies the danger of alienation: forgetting the lived body that silently anchors our being-in-the-world.

Recognizing embodiment is essential for any authentic human existence. The lived body is the condition of our freedom—it is through the body that we act, speak, and engage with the world. Our sensory and motor capacities make agency possible: as Husserl emphasizes, the body is the original site of the most basic experience of freedom, the prereflective sense of "*I can.*"[19] At the same time, the body is not merely a vehicle for freedom; it also imposes its own demands. It must be cared for, and it unfolds according to a temporality that is distinct from that of consciousness.

While consciousness leaps across time—through memory, anticipation, or the imagination—the body moves according to cyclical,

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[19] Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 159–161.

biological rhythms: hunger, fatigue, sleep.[20] These rhythms are embedded in broader natural cycles—the alternation of day and night, and the changing seasons.[21] But alongside these rhythms is a more inescapable trajectory: the body ages. Unlike consciousness, which can envision limitless futures, the body is bound to irreversible time. Aging marks the essential passivity of bodily existence—a passivity that resists mastery, projection, and control.

Aging is thus not merely biological but existential. It reminds us, again and again, of our fragility and finitude. However far we extend our thoughts or aspirations, we remain tethered to the slow, intractable unfolding of embodied time. The body ages without our consent, revealing the limits of will and the irreducibility of our bodily being.

Just as the body cannot be replaced, neither can the *lifeworld*—the pre-reflective world of lived experience.[22] The lifeworld precedes all scientific models and digital constructions. It is not one viewpoint among others but the grounding horizon from which all perspectives arise. Unlike curated digital realities—social media personas, algorithmically tailored feeds, or performative spaces like reality television—the lifeworld is not constructed or chosen. It is given. We cannot opt out of it; we are immersed in it from the start, bodily and affectively.

We may model, interpret, and represent the world in various ways, but first and foremost, we live it. Likewise, before we project, modify, or curate our bodily image, we inhabit our body from within. This inner, affective life cannot be entirely shaped or controlled. Feeling exemplifies this passivity. Unlike thought, which we direct, feelings arise—they happen to us. While we may regulate or conceal our emotions, we do not generate them at will. Modern culture's attempt to control feeling—through substances, technologies, and affective optimization—only deepens the tension between the unruly givenness of the body and the ideal of self-mastery.

This tension gives rise to a distinctive form of *body alienation* in digital culture. Two main dimensions can be identified. First, alienation

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[20] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 82–84.

[21] Thomas Fuchs, "The Cyclical Time of the Body and Its Relation to Linear Time," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 25, no. 7–8 (2018): 48.

[22] Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, 103–104.

arises from the *idealization of the body*. Rather than accepting ourselves as we are—bodily beings with particular limitations and textures of experience—we come to identify with idealized, digitally mediated images. These representations, circulated throughout visual economies, are imposed back onto the lived body, which increasingly appears inadequate in comparison to its curated reflection.

Second, alienation stems from the *digital colonization of the lifeworld*. As more of our experience shifts into mediated environments—screens, interfaces, and abstract representations—our embodied engagement with the physical world recedes. The body becomes sedentary, passive, and stationary. It is reduced to a perceptual substrate rather than a dynamic, world-involving agent. In contrast to the apparent fluidity and "freedom" of digital movement, the body begins to feel like an obstacle, an inconvenient remainder of our animal condition.

This alienation echoes a much older philosophical suspicion of the body. In *Phaedo*, Plato portrays the body (*sōma*) as a prison (*sēma*) of the soul.[23] This dualism resurfaces in transhumanist aspirations to transcend the body—through enhancement, digitization, or mind-uploading—as if liberation lies in abandoning our corporeal condition.[24] However, such visions do not resolve body alienation; they culminate it. They represent the ultimate forgetting of the lived body as the very ground of thought, experience, and freedom itself.

The Christian Message of Incarnation: Embodiment, Redemption, and Human Fulfillment

While Paul's theology often contrasts life according to the flesh (*sarx, caro*) with life according to the spirit (*pneuma, spiritus*), he also affirms the integral value of the human body. He declares the body to be a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and maintains that salvation not only includes the soul but also the glorified body of the believer. Despite

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[23] Plato, "*Phaedo* 82e–84b," in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 72–73.

[24] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Technology as the Elixir of Immortality. Resurgent Philosophical and Spiritual Enigma of Human Imprisonment," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 977, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Platovnjak.

employing a dualistic vocabulary, Paul—rooted in the anthropological vision of the Hebrew Scriptures—does not endorse the radical body-soul dualism characteristic of Greek philosophical thought, particularly in its Platonic form. This is evident in the mockery he receives at the Areopagus (Acts 17:32), where his proclamation of bodily resurrection directly challenges the Greek assumption that true salvation entails liberation from the body, not its redemption.

Yet throughout Christian history, elements of Greek metaphysics have shaped theological developments, sometimes distorting the biblical vision. These influences have contributed to persistent ambivalence or even negativity toward the body, often driven by moral concerns and attempts to regulate biological drives—especially sexuality. However, it would be equally misguided to interpret the Christian view of the body as analogous to modern corporeal glorification or as aligned with the contemporary suspicion of metaphysics.

Christianity assigns a central place to the body, but within a radically different horizon from that of secular modernity. Its significance does not lie in aesthetic idealization, consumerist display, or technological enhancement. Nor is it reduced to biological determinism or cultural construction. Rather, the body's meaning is grounded in the mystery of the Incarnation—the belief that, in Jesus Christ, God became fully human, assuming not just a human soul or mind but a human body. In this decisive event of Christian faith, the body is not opposed to the divine, nor merely tolerated by it; it becomes the very locus of divine self-revelation, redemption, and entrance into material existence.

Biblical Anthropology and the Body: From Jewish Roots to Christian Horizons

While Greek philosophy begins with the cosmos and derives the nature of the human from its rational harmony, the biblical-Jewish tradition begins with God—a God who precedes the world, who freely creates it, and who addresses the human being. This divine word does not constitute the human as a purely rational or spiritual entity but as a unity of body and spirit, formed from the earth and animated by the breath of God. There is no metaphysical dualism here: the human is

not a soul trapped in a body, but a whole being, brought into existence by divine will.

The law (*Torah*) revealed to this embodied being is not a cosmic principle or system of rational order but a personal address—a guide to living that is intrinsically relational. It not only governs the vertical relationship with God but also the horizontal relationship with other human beings. Biblical ethics thus does not abstract the human from flesh but situates embodiment within a concrete ethical vocation. The human being is always a being-in-relation, and this relationality is profoundly corporeal.[25]

The neighbor is not encountered as an abstract soul or rational subject, but in their vulnerable bodily presence. The Hebrew Scriptures consistently call for care for the most physically exposed: the widow, the orphan, the stranger. These are not categories but concrete bodies in need of nourishment, shelter, and protection. Ethical responsibility thus unfolds through bodily acts: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty. The body's deepest significance lies in its capacity to serve, to give, to respond.

From this perspective, embodiment finds meaning not in autonomy or aesthetic perfection but in being for the other. The body becomes the medium of divine love. This relational anthropology reaches its radical culmination in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, in which God becomes not merely a spiritual principle but a body—born, vulnerable, suffering, and ultimately glorified. In this glorification, Christianity not only affirms the spiritual dignity of the human being but the enduring, eschatological value of the body itself.

The Christian claim was so profound that it redefined the Jewish religious imagination: the God of Israel had become human in the person of Jesus Christ. This claim did not abolish Judaism but radicalized it. *Verbum caro factum est* ("the Word became flesh," Jn 1:14) is not a metaphor but a literal and ontological statement. In Christ, the transcendent God who had spoken to Abraham and the prophets entered the materiality—the *flesh* (*sarx*)—of human existence and became subject

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[25] Erwin Dirscherl, *Grundriss Theologischer Anthropologie. Die Entschiedenheit des Menschen angesichts des Anderen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2006), 61.

to vulnerability, time, and sensory limitations. In this act, Christianity bridges what had remained an unbridgeable divide in both Jewish and Greek thought: the ontological chasm between God and humanity.[26] For Judaism, the gap reflected divine holiness; for Greek metaphysics, it lay between the eternal and the perishable. Christianity proclaims that this divide is traversed in Christ. God "takes form" in Christ, where *form* is to be understood in Balthasar's sense of *Gestalt*: "The Incarnation uses created Being at a new depth as a language and a means of expression for the divine Being and essence."[27]

The resurrection further reinforces this claim: it is not the survival of a disembodied soul, but the restoration of the whole person[28]—spirit and flesh united. Eternal life is not envisioned as pure intellectual self-contemplation (*noēsis noēseōs*) or the speculative unfolding of spirit. Rather, salvation embraces the flesh—that is, the inward, lived dimension of the body, which phenomenology carefully distinguishes from the body as a mere physical object. The promise of bodily resurrection affirms the fullness of embodied personhood, now transfigured to share in divine glory.

Yet even in Christ's glorified body, the body is not an end in itself. Jesus not only had flesh; he gave his flesh. His body was given, broken, shared—culminating in the Eucharist, the sacrament of a body offered *for you.* This act discloses the body's deepest theological and anthropological truth: it is not a possession or object of self-fulfillment, nor a concept to be understood. The body is a vocation. As Emmanuel Levinas suggests, it is a call for responsibility and an ethical relationship with the Other.[29]

This vocation emerges not from objectifying the body but from its lived dimension—flesh as felt from within, as the site of emotion, vulnerability, and responsiveness. Even reason and thought are embodied: they do not arise in detachment from the world but through bodily

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[26] James Mensch, "Transcendence and Intertwining," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 77 (2017) 3/4: 485–486.

[27] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 29.

[28] Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, 9th ed. (München: Kösel, 2007), 331–332.

[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 187–201.

feeling, mood, and presence. What we call "spiritual" or "immaterial"—a word of consolation, an act of love—always takes an embodied form. Words are spoken with the voice, written by the hand, and carried by the breath and gesture. In this sense, the Christian vision does not negate the body but integrates it into the highest expressions of love, meaning, and divine communion.

Embodied Fullness: The Christian Vision of Life in a Disembodied Age

The Christian understanding of salvation—like Jesus' proclamation of the "Kingdom of God"—makes the radical claim that it offers the fullness of life that every human being ultimately seeks. This is not life merely prolonged or intensified in pleasure, but life fulfilled in its deepest human dimension. Crucially, this eschatological fullness encompasses the whole person, including the embodied self. It is on this integral vision of humanity that Christianity grounds its universal relevance: it speaks to the soul and the body, to the entire human being in search of meaning.

This vision offers a compelling counter-narrative to the dominant tendencies in contemporary digital culture. Christianity does not respond with nostalgia or moral panic, but by affirming the body's irreducible role in a meaningful life. It resists two prevalent reductive trajectories: transhumanism, which seeks to overcome the body as a technical limit, and posthumanism, which dissolves the human into the flux of material nature, denying any unique spiritual vocation. The former reintroduces a dualism that devalues embodiment; the latter erases the distinctiveness of the human altogether.

In both, the body is either a problem to solve or a contingent accident. While such views may promise optimization or enhancement, they struggle to articulate what it means to live *fully*—to live a life marked by meaning, love, and relation. Yet these reductive frameworks are becoming increasingly normative within digital culture.[30]

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[30] Stjepan Štivić, "Upanje v krščanstvu in transhumanizem [Hope in Christianity and Transhumanism]," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 81, no. 4 (2021): 855, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2021/04/Stivic.

The erosion of embodied life is now widely recognized. The question is how to respond—how to recover or reimagine the fullness of life amid digital mediation. One common response is to reclaim the body, but this too often takes the form of self-referential optimization. The body becomes a curated site of experiences—tracked, aestheticized, and broadcast. A visit to a trending location, for instance, may be driven less by the intrinsic richness of the experience than by the imperative to *embody* what others are virtually displaying—feeding a fear of missing out rather than fulfilling a longing for real presence.

Such a pursuit of embodiment, while understandable, can easily be co-opted by consumerist logic. The body becomes a platform for accumulating experiences, rather than a site of ethical relation or transcendence. This logic also shapes intimate relationships, where digitally mediated ideals lead individuals to seek encounters not for their intrinsic value, but to match a cultural script of what love or intimacy should look like. Even care for bodily health—such as screen fatigue awareness—can become another expression of the fear that one's body may fall short of digital-age ideals.

In all of this, the body is either overexposed or overburdened—treated as a project to manage or a limit to transcend. What is missing is a vision of the body as *given*, as relational, as the ground of being-for-others. Christianity, through the Incarnation and resurrection, offers precisely such a vision.[31] It affirms the body not as an object to be mastered or a source of alienation, but as the site of personal existence, of communion, of love. The fullness of life, in this view, is not achieved apart from the body but through its transformation in love and hope.

This vision provides a criterion for discernment in our digital age. The fullness of life is not a solitary ideal but unfolds in relationships—rooted in the personal nature of God. God is not an impersonal force but a relational being, and human relationships mirror this divine structure. Authentic human connection cannot be replaced by interaction with devices or artificial agents, no matter how advanced. The body finds its meaning in this relational context.

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[31] Josef Wohlmuth, *Die Tora spricht die Sprache des Menschen. Theologische Aufsätze und Meditationen zur Beziehung von Judentum und Christentum* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 41.

To return to the body, then, is not merely to reject digital mediation or to reclaim physical health—it is to return to *embodied relationality*, to the ways we live with and for others. Even in digital exchange, we intuitively assume the other's bodily presence—their voice, face, and gestures. Every real conversation presupposes the other's embodied being.

Yet digital mediation can risk reduction, turning the other into a projection or function. The person becomes a stimulus for satisfaction rather than a presence to be encountered. This instrumentalization stands in stark contrast to the Christian understanding of embodiment as a vocation to communion.

Still, the digital is not inherently alienating. It can support and deepen embodied relationships when used in service to them. Modern communication allows us to maintain presence with loved ones across vast distances, to see and hear them, to share moments. Even when mediated, such encounters bear the trace of real presence, of longing for proximity and touch. The desire to see a smile, to recognize a gesture, affirms that even digital interactions remain haunted by the hope of physical nearness.

Here, the sense of touch is particularly revealing. As phenomenologists like Husserl emphasize, touch is uniquely reciprocal: to touch is also to be touched. One can look without being seen, speak without being heard—but one cannot touch without entering into mutual presence.[32] Touch is the paradigmatic expression of embodied reciprocity and vulnerability. In a world increasingly defined by simulation, the irreducibility of touch reminds us of what cannot be digitized: the radical nearness of another's flesh.

Christianity thus invites us not to reject the digital world but to inhabit it differently—to remain attuned to the bodily, the relational, and the transcendent.[33] The Christian vision of embodiment is not about negating the body, nor escaping from it, but allowing it to become the medium through which love, relation, and divine

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[32] Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 158.

[33] Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu. Eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop [The Problem of Religious Experience in a Digitally Transformed World. An Existential-Phenomenological Approach]," Bogoslovni vestnik 84, no. 1 (2024): 31, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun.

communion are realized. Salvation is not the body's erasure, but its transfiguration in communion.

Conclusion

Christianity offers a transcendent message: the ultimate meaning of myself and my body—which I both *am* and *have*—is not found in self-enclosure, but in self-transcendence: in going out of myself toward the other. This movement of transcendence unfolds within interpersonal relationships, where the body becomes the medium of a gift, and love is fulfilled in the logic of giving.

It begins with the recognition that I have not brought myself into being. I have received myself—my embodied self, my particular body—from a personal God who wills me into existence, who desires me as I am, and who affirms me at the deepest level. In a culture saturated with comparisons and ideals, I may be tempted to judge my body as insufficient, to envy the gifts others seem to have received. Yet this perspective can be transformed. Rather than fixating on what I lack, I can learn to focus on what has been given—to what I can do and be through the body entrusted to me. My body is no longer measured against an abstract ideal of perfection; it is seen instead in light of the radical possibility that it might not have existed at all. Compared to nothingness, everything is a surplus. Seen in this light—as a gift that need not have existed but does—my body awakens a new kind of gratitude, one that embraces even its limitations, because they too belong to what has been given.

From this gratitude arises a deeper realization: that my body, even in its weakness or imperfection, is not only something to receive, but something to offer. What I have been given becomes the very capacity through which I give myself to others. A glance, a gesture, a word spoken in kindness—these are not abstract acts but bodily ones. Through them, I offer my embodied self, and in this giving, my body finds its fullest meaning: it becomes a body *for the other*.

Such a way of living requires faith. The dominant voice of contemporary culture often insists that the body is ours alone, that it must be secured, enhanced, and optimized for our own purposes. The body is

viewed as a possession to protect, not as a gift to share. Yet the Christian vision tells another story. It calls on us to trust that in giving ourselves, we do not lose our lives, but bear fruit. Like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground, the body fulfills itself not by preserving its own life, but by offering it in love.

This faith unveils the paradox at the heart of Christian hope: what appears to be loss is the path to fullness, and only in the gift of the embodied self can we find life in abundance. In this light, embodiment is not a burden to escape from nor an object to idolize, but a sacred vocation—a path through which we learn to love and to be loved, in the flesh.

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TALKING AND THINKING WITH AI: HOW AI CHATBOTS RESTRUCTURE EPISTEMIC IDENTITY AND VIRTUE

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Introduction[1]

The integration of large language models (LLMs) or AI-driven chatbots into everyday communication and knowledge practices has important implications for how we think and understand ourselves as epistemic agents. The "Just Google it" tack is rapidly getting replaced by "Just ask ChatGPT." This paper investigates how AI chatbots reshape epistemic identity and virtue, focusing on the effects of human-AI interaction. One of the proposals is, thus, that if one wants to fully understand and accommodate the epistemic dimensions of human-AI interactions, one has to employ the notion of epistemic identity. Epistemic identity is the aspect of a person's identity that shapes and is shaped by their ways of forming beliefs, engaging in epistemic practices (such as reasoning, judgment, and discourse), their core epistemic beliefs, and their values and goals regarding knowledge and knowledge-related practices. The use of AI chatbots can ultimately impact one's epistemic identity, including epistemic virtues such as curiosity, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness on the one hand, and raise

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questions about epistemic agency and responsibility on the other. This paper emphasizes the importance of reflective practices that maintain human autonomy, foster epistemic responsibility, and promote virtuous collaboration with AI systems. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a partial reimagining of epistemic identity and epistemic collaboration in the age of AI, seeking a balance between the advantages of AI and the significance and uniqueness of human intellectual endeavors.

The evolution from "Just Google it" to "Just ask ChatGPT" represents more than a mere change in the technological preferences of users; it signposts a more fundamental transformation in how humans conceptualize knowledge acquisition and related epistemic practices. This shift marks the transition from information retrieval and evaluation to conversational knowledge generation, fundamentally altering the process of technology-mediated inquiry itself. When we "Google something," we engage (in the good case scenario) in actively searching for, evaluating, and synthesizing information. The user must formulate the search term(s) or query, navigate through multiple sources, assess credibility, and construct knowledge and understanding from disparate pieces of information. Although the process is technology-mediated, it still allows for aspects of epistemic vigilance as the general and critical disposition necessary for responsible knowledge acquisition to be utilized. Dan Sperber conceptualizes epistemic vigilance as a set of (human) cognitive mechanisms that help us evaluate the reliability and trustworthiness of the information we receive from others. Epistemic vigilance operates on many levels and includes varied aspects, e.g. we assess (i) the competence, knowledgeableness, and benevolence of whoever is providing the information, (ii) the plausibility and consistency of the information given what we already know, and (iii) the context and manner of communication—that is, why this is person telling us this, and whether their way of communicating suggests honesty or deception.[2] This, of course, does not mean that the online Google searching

[2] Sperber and his coauthors also argue that although epistemic vigilance is an epistemic virtue, it must be moderated by our other epistemic and practical concerns, to avoid being too vigilant and consequently miss out on valuable information and become overly suspicious of others. Also, epistemic vigilance does not need to always be conscious or deliberate, since it is also effective when it takes place through intuitive and automatic processes. (Dan Sperber et al.,

allows the full potential of epistemic vigilance to be in play, since the entire setting is highly impoverished. Many of the traditional cues that our epistemic vigilance utilizes are either absent or very compromised, e.g., there is no direct social interaction with cues such as someone's face or tone of voice, or the reputation and track record might be missing (given that anonymity and pseudonymity are widespread online). Furthermore, some of the cues themselves are easily manipulated, and some superficial cues could easily mislead (e.g., paying undue attention to the really professional and well-made design of the webpage). Social media sites and algorithms add another layer of complexity through their tendency to create echo chambers and filter bubbles that can reinforce our existing beliefs while limiting exposure to corrective information.[3] And finally, the extent of information available online greatly surpasses offline and might overload our vigilance capacities. Putting aside these limitations, the "Google it" approach preserves some aspects of the investigative dimension of human inquiry.

In contrast to this, when someone "asks ChatGPT," they enter into what appears to be a dialogue with a seemingly (extremely) knowledgeable interlocutor. In most cases, the AI chatbot presents information in the form of complete and coherent responses that mimic human expertise. This might give rise to a certain sense of epistemic immediacy, i.e., the instantaneous provision of seemingly authoritative knowledge. This is not to say that one is prohibited from utilizing as many tools of epistemic vigilance as possible, even in this context. But the inherent danger is obvious. This is the shift being made from the model of "distributed cognition" and humans actively orchestrating various information sources, toward a model of "delegated cognition" where huge and highly capable AI systems perform much of the cognitive or epistemic work. Such a shift also includes an impact on epistemic habits, expectations, and practices, and ultimately, on our epistemic virtues and epistemic identity. Furthermore, such AI chatbots typically provide information (as a sort of decontextualized knowledge) stripped of

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"Epistemic Vigilance," *Mind & Language* 25, no. 4 (2010): 359–393, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2010.01394.x).

[3] Thi C. Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, n. 2 (2020): 141–161, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32.

its original context, i.e., the debates, methodologies, and assumptions that shaped its production, which might be retained to a considerable degree in the "just Google it" paradigm. While some might brush aside such a gloomy predicament as an overreaction in light of recent developments related to AI chatbots, one should nonetheless be careful and pay attention to empirical findings. Some recent behavioral studies indicate that users spend (significantly) less time cross-referencing sources when using conversational AI compared to traditional search engines. Also, the latter type of system is perceived as more useful, enjoyable, and offers higher levels of satisfaction.[4]

Michael Lynch proposes that we can frame the developments related to our epistemic agency and epistemic environment in the digital age in terms of the difference between pollution and corruption. "Corruption is not the same as pollution. Pollution is something that happens to a system; corruption is something that happens within a system. […] (I)nformation culture is corrupt when the rules of evidence and reliability that some of its participants allegedly adhere to—their epistemic principles, in other words—are not the ones they more frequently employ. This phenomenon might be what some people mean when they talk about living in a "post-truth" culture. Of course, we don't literally live in a world where nothing is true. Truth exists as much as it ever has. What has happened is that our information culture has become so corrupt as to tolerate and encourage self-deceptive attitudes toward truth and evidence. It encourages us to care more about our convictions than about truth, but to tell ourselves we are doing otherwise."[5] What makes the case of AI chatbots specific is that such corruption is covert and thus very hard to detect.

This paper delves deeper into some of the aspects related to this shift, emphasizing its inherent risks and some possible mitigation measures. The paper proceeds in the following way. Section 2 elaborates on the notions of epistemic identity and epistemic virtue in more detail and

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[4] Ruiyun Rayna Xu, Yue Feng and Hailiang Chen, "ChatGPT vs. Google: A Comparative Study of Search Performance and User Experience," *ArXiv*, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2307.01135.

[5] Michael P. Lynch, *Know-it-All Society: Truth and Arrogance in Political Culture* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 2019), 36.

highlights their interconnectedness. Section 3 explores some of the possible impacts of the use of AI systems on our epistemic identity and epistemic virtues, and critically evaluates them. It also addresses the question of how we should conceptualize, from the epistemic aspect, the relevant AI systems. At the end (subsection 3.1), the impacts of the use of AI systems and human-AI interaction on epistemic virtues are highlighted. Section 4 concludes the paper with a proposal for restructuring the conceptualization of human epistemic identity in light of the emergence of generative AI systems and widespread human-AI interactions. The key aspect of the proposal is to conceive or envisage them as epistemic partners.

Epistemic Virtue and Epistemic Identity

Epistemology recently underwent an important shift to virtue-based theorizing. As part of this turn, the principal focus shifted from the properties of one's beliefs to the characteristics of the epistemic agent, in particular to epistemic processes and character traits or virtues. The simplest way to define epistemic virtues is to frame them as the epistemic (intellectual or cognitive) qualities (abilities, dispositions, learned habits, personality traits, etc.) of individuals that help them pursue their epistemic goals (true beliefs about the world, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, etc.). Epistemic virtues are thus dispositions that make someone good at acquiring knowledge, forming true beliefs, etc. They include things like intellectual honesty, curiosity, open-mindedness, critical thinking, humility about one's epistemic limitations, epistemic perseverance, etc. Consequently, epistemic virtuousness is the state of possessing and exercising epistemic virtues, which means being intellectually virtuous in how one seeks information, evaluates evidence, and forms beliefs. It requires consistently exhibiting responsible intellectual character—that is, being disposed to think, inquire, and believe in ways that are conducive to gaining knowledge and avoiding falsehood. Epistemic virtuousness includes fulfilling one's epistemic responsibilities. Intellectual virtues like curiosity, honesty, and thoroughness are not merely cognitive skills but involve deep motivational commitments

to truth and understanding.[6] It is also worth pointing out that the focus on epistemic virtues and epistemic virtuousness also highlights the importance of epistemic agency and the agent's epistemic responsibility

In order to capture the comprehensive impact of human-AI interactions, one can go a step further than this and introduce the term epistemic identity, which is thus far fairly underdeveloped and not utilized much in the literature. Furthermore, such a notion can be very useful when considering human-AI interaction from the epistemic point of view. We propose delineating it along the following lines. Epistemic identity can be initially understood as the aspect of one's identity that is intimately intertwined with one's manner and scope of forming beliefs and other epistemic practices (such as thinking and reasoning, judgment, assessment of credibility, engagement in discourse, etc.), one's beliefs about the essence of knowledge, one's associated epistemic standards, and one's epistemic sensibility. A similar but somewhat narrower use of the term 'epistemic identity' is pervasive in education studies and psychology, and is closely related to the learning styles of students and their stances toward knowledge and knowledge-acquiring practices. E.g., one can find talk of epistemic identity associated with talk about epistemic positions, e.g., "evaluative or reflective," "absolutist," "personal," and "rule-based" epistemic positions.[7] Epistemic identity can also mean treating certain beliefs as central or part of one's identity. As such, it can influence the information we attend to, remember, and seek, as well as how we reason. Finally, epistemic identity includes what one sees as a worthy goal of epistemic endeavors or practices.[8] In this

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[6] Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Vojko Strahovnik, "Uvod v vrlinsko epistemologijo [Introduction to Virtue Epistemology]," *Analiza,* 8, no. 3 (2004): 101–118.

[7] Marie L. Caltabiano, Raoul J. Adam and Rebecca Denham, "Epistemic Identity and Undergraduate Students' Understandings of Psychology," *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling* 4, no. 30 (2019): 299–314, https://gaexcellence.com/ijepc/article/view/3045; Elise J. West, "Perry's Legacy: Models of Epistemological Development," *Journal of Adult Development* 11 (2004): 61–70, https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JADE.0000024540.12150.69.

[8] Besides linking epistemic identity to individuals, there is also a sense that ties this notion to groups or communities. One such framing understands such epistemic identity as partially constituted by epistemic practices as "socially organised and interactionally accomplished ways that members of a group propose, communicate, assess, and legitimise knowledge

sense, it pertains to a central aspect of one's epistemic agency. More systematically, epistemic identity can be defined as

> a structure that consists of three main elements, that is (i) basic epistemic beliefs, which can be either identity-constituting or identity-affecting, (ii) epistemic practices, dispositions, virtues, habits, capacities, etc., and (iii) one's epistemic values (in the broader sense, which includes such things as epistemic goals or aims, priorities, ideals, norms, standards, sensitivity, etc.).

Virtues and virtuousness are thus an integral part of one's epistemic identity. In the remainder of this section, we will address some open questions pertaining to the proposed notion of epistemic identity. Nick Byrd relates epistemic identity to "the phenomenon of treating certain beliefs as part of one's identity," which can lead to a situation in which "I might prioritize my epistemic identity over other epistemic goods" and such an identity can subsequently "influence what we seek, what we attend to, what we perceive, and thereby what we remember, whom we listen to, and how we reason."[9] It should be emphasized that Byrd does not limit the scope of the relevant identity-determining beliefs to epistemic beliefs; for him, an epistemic identity can be determined or shaped by any sort of belief that has consequences for our other beliefs and epistemic practices.[10]

One open question regarding such a view is whether such beliefs are constitutive of epistemic identity or merely beliefs that influence epistemic identity. We propose understanding epistemic identity in the former, narrower way. Epistemic identity thus comprises those beliefs that are themselves epistemic beliefs (e.g., "In order to know something, my

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claims". Gregory J. Kelly and Peter Licona, "Epistemic Practices and Science Education," in *History, Philosophy and Science Teaching: New Perspectives*, ed. Michael R. Matthews (Cham: Springer Verlag, 2017), 139–165.

[9] Nick Byrd, "Bounded Reflectivism and Epistemic Identity," *Metaphilosophy* 53, no. 1 (2021): 57–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12534.

[10] This is clear from the examples that Byrd uses to demonstrate this, such as the following. "Suppose that I identify with a religion. If you criticise some aspect of my religion, then I might reflectively defend my religious beliefs rather than dispassionately submit to the best arguments and evidence. In short, I might prioritise my epistemic identity over other epistemic goods. Or suppose that you identify with a particular political party—one that explicitly codifies its ideological commitments in a party platform that is recited in its public speeches, advertisements, and so on. In other words, you identify not only with the party but also with its values and beliefs. In this case your political identity is an epistemic identity." (*Ibid.*, 57–58)

beliefs must be accompanied by a feeling of certainty." or "One should not trust one's senses on all occasions, since they might be misleading.") or beliefs that significantly affect other aspects of epistemic identity (e.g., beliefs like "I always go with my gut feelings when it comes to evaluating other people's motives."). Holding a particular religious or political belief strongly does not necessarily mean that this affects one's epistemic identity *per se* (although they are undoubtedly a part of the overall identity). Epistemic identity pertains more centrally to how we know (and believe) than what we know (and believe). We also need to take into account that someone might hold particular epistemic beliefs about themselves that are not true or not well supported. For example, one might think of oneself as a truly unbiased and fair evaluator or grader without this being the case. In such cases, these beliefs constitute one's self-ascribed epistemic identity. This self-ascribed epistemic identity might thus differ from actual epistemic identity, though it is important to note that both can significantly affect other beliefs, motives, practices, and values.

There are several other attempts that try to elaborate on what determines epistemic identity, how it is formed, and what purpose it serves. Loren Demerath speaks about epistemological identity theory, which she sees as explaining "how individuals enhance their knowledge of self and the world by creating and maintaining identities" and this "theory reconceptualizes commitment to an identity as the degree to which that identity organizes and clarifies one's experience of the world and him/herself."[11] She further claims that we are continually constructing or reconstructing our identity; i.e. we strive to preserve, improve, or alter our self-perception and the epistemological identity theory contends that we act in this way for epistemological reasons: to give us a feeling of meaning(fullness) by making us feel as though we understand our world, ourselves, and the ties that connect them. We create our identities in order to maintain that sense of meaning and significance. Identity loss could result in emotional and cognitive disruption—a loss

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[11] Loren Demerath, "Epistemological Identity Theory: Reconceptualising Commitment as Self-Knowledge," *Sociological Spectrum* 26, no. 5 (2006): 491, https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170600786208.

of epistemic certainty and security regarding who we are. This latter aspect relates more to the function or role of epistemic identity.[12]

Lastly, one can also mention another important element of epistemic identity. One's epistemic identity also includes what one sees as a worthy goal of one's epistemic practice, e.g., truth, forming and maintaining beliefs based on sufficient evidence, forming and maintaining beliefs that must be in some way significant, relevant, or useful, knowledge, understanding, believing in accordance with the intellectual virtues, etc. Standards and norms that we follow in epistemic practices or deem important for them are also part of the evaluative dimension. Although there are different proposals on how to frame and understand epistemic virtue and epistemic identity, the general idea sketched above should be clear enough for our purposes.

Aliens in the Space of Reasons: AI Chatbots and Human-AI Interactions

Why is the aspect of epistemic identity important in human-AI relationships or, to put it more neutrally, in our use of AI systems? We do not particularly highlight or question the impact on our epistemic identity when getting a soda from a vending machine, driving a car, using a public transportation system, or using a calculator. What makes AI and AI implementations special in this regard? Furthermore, are there any specific features of epistemic identity that make it more malleable in light of human-AI interaction (as opposed to our other forms of identity)? Initially, one could raise the following considerations. For some other aspects of the human-AI relationship, e.g., AI's moral responsibility or the possibility of a genuine emotional or personal relationship, the influencing force of AI can be more easily dismissed on the basis that an AI system merely responds in a manner that can be interpreted as emotional engagement (e.g. providing care, companionship, friendship, or romantic involvement in a reciprocal way)[13] or that

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[12] *Ibid.*, 492.

[13] Anne Zimmerman, Joel Janhonen and Emily Beer, "Human/AI relationships: challenges, downsides, and impacts on human/human relationships," *AI Ethics* 4 (2024), 1555–1567,

it makes no sense at all to ascribe moral responsibility to AI-based systems, e.g. self-driving cars. (This is not to say that someone else cannot be morally responsible, such as the programmers or the company that produces and sells the car.) Now, the domain of epistemic identity is not so clear-cut. Although it can of course be questioned whether an AI system like an LLM model really engages in reasoning, offers us explanation or other epistemic activities, it is at least sensible to look into the human-AI relationship from this angle.

One starting question could be whether AI systems, like ChatGPT, DeepSeek, or Claude, are themselves epistemic agents. What does it mean to be an epistemic agent? A conventional answer is that an epistemic agent is an agent with the ability to perform knowledge-related activities, such as gathering, processing, analyzing, evaluating, and utilizing information. This includes forming beliefs, justifying them, revising them in light of new information or evidence, and utilizing them in further tasks. Also included is the ability to communicate knowledge and beliefs to others, as well as to understand and interpret the knowledge communicated by others. Lastly, agency usually includes a certain degree of autonomy and intentionality, related to knowledge-seeking behavior in the case of epistemic agency. *Prima facie,* AI systems such as LLM-based chatbots do not meet the conditions for epistemic agency since they lack, at least, the required mental states such as beliefs and intentions. But AI chatbots might well emulate all this in a way that nudges our perception of such AI systems toward treating them as agents. It is also worth noting that the subjective mental models, including the range of attitudes or stances that we, humans form and adopt toward such systems, can be primed in ways that inhibit their recognition as epistemic agents.[14] Advertising by AI developers cer-

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https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-023-00348-8.

[14] Bojan Žalec, "Ali je umetna inteligenca inteligenca v pravem pomenu besede?: vprašanje psihičnih značilnosti in splošnosti [Is artificial intelligence an intelligence in the true sense of the word?: the issue of mental characteristics and generality]," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 3 (2023): 816–822, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Zalec; Pat Pataranutaporn et al., "Influencing human-AI interaction by priming beliefs about AI can increase perceived trustworthiness, empathy and effectiveness," *Nature Machine Intelligence* 5 (2023), 1076–1086, https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-023-00720-7.

tainly uses this aspect when trying to sell AI system as products under names like "assistant," "companion," "tutor," "copilot," etc.

A similar aspect is hinted at by Bert Heinrichs and Sebastian Knell in the paper in which they introduce the talk about artificial intelligent agents (AIA) as "aliens in the space of reasons."[15] The space of reasons can be delineated as the domain of epistemic activity that is governed by normativity, i.e., the domain in which concepts, beliefs, and justifications operate in relation to knowledge as the final goal.[16] Participation in the space of reasons entails being subject to normative constraints, e.g., bound by what counts as a reason for belief or action. Being in the space of reasons is not merely a matter of being causally responsive to the environment; it is to be accountable to norms of justification and assertion. Heinrichs and Knell argue that AIAs, e.g., widely used AI recommendation systems or AI chatbots, have already seemingly entered the space of reasons since they make knowledge claims and attempt to justify, explain, and elaborate on them. But this is a mere appearance; AIAs do not quite play by the rules of the space of reasons. And thus the "alien" talk captures how AI systems appear to participate in rational discourse and knowledge claims but operate according to completely different principles than human reasoners. In particular, they don't engage in the same kind of reason-giving, responsibility-taking practices that characterize genuine participation.

A more modest view, but a view that nonetheless captures the special significance of AI systems for considering epistemic identity and virtue, is that AI systems are different to other technologies since they are very closely related to human epistemic agency and epistemic practices. Such a move substantially aligns with Ramon Alvarado's proposal that what makes AI so special is that it is, first and foremost, an example of

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[15] Bert Heinrichs and Sebastian Knell, "Aliens in the Space of Reasons? On the Interaction Between Humans and Artificial Intelligent Agents," *Philosophy & Technology* 34 (2021), 1569–1580, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-021-00475-2.

[16] The notion of the "space of reasons" emerges from the thought of Wilfrid Sellars and is linked to his characterisation of knowledge, i.e., to his claim that "in characterising an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 169.)

epistemic technology and, furthermore, a type of epistemic technology in a very strong or prominent sense. AI's defining characteristic lies in its essence as an epistemic technology, which separates it from other technologies that we use or interact with. Alvarado highlights that AI is a case of epistemic technology because (i) it is primarily employed in epistemic contexts (such as inquiry), (ii) it primarily deals with epistemic content (e.g., propositions, models, and data), and (iii) it carries out epistemic operations or tasks on epistemic content (such as analysis, predictions, inferences, recognitions, etc.).[17] And it is not merely AI's design or what it can do, but AI is an epistemic technology in terms of what it is used for as well.[18]Even if we go with the more modest proposal of thinking of AI systems as pieces of epistemic technology, one can meaningfully question the impact of such a technology on human epistemic agents and their epistemic identity through technological mediation. Peter-Paul Verbeek convincingly demonstrated that technologies do not merely provide neutral tools for pre-existing human purposes but actively shape human experience and agency.[19] Consequently, and in the context of this paper, AI systems do not simply help us access knowledge, but they significantly alter what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is validated, and what kinds of epistemic agents we become. Furthermore, one can speak about a new type of epistemic dependence.[20] AI systems as epistemic technology introduce epistemic dependence that is neither fully social or interpersonal (since AI systems lack certain aspects that would make them epistemic agents) nor fully individual (since AI systems embody collective human knowledge, thought in complex ways, which differs from social knowledge). All this culminates in the technological mediation of human epistemic identity operating through human-technology relations,[21] where AI

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17 Ramon Alvarado, "AI as Epistemic Technology," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 29, no. 32 (2023), 19, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-023-00451-3.

18 *Ibid*., 15.

19 Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

20 John Hardwig, "Epistemic dependence," *Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 7 (1985), 335–349, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026523.

21 Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

systems assume various roles, e.g., the role of an extension of our cognitive capacities, interpreter of complex information, quasi-agent, or represent a set of background conditions that subtly shapes our epistemic environment. One of the central questions is, therefore, how all this impacts (enhance, diminish, etc.) human epistemic agency, including the question of whether we are witnessing the emergence of genuinely augmented epistemic agents, or we are observing a gradual atrophy of essential intellectual capacities. Before returning to the question about epistemic identity, let us consider the issues mentioned from the perspective of epistemic virtues, in particular epistemic curiosity, humility, and open-mindedness.

AI and Epistemic Virtues

Epistemic curiosity might be framed as a disposition to seek knowledge and understanding, as well as being willing to pursue questions even when they lead to complexity or uncertainty. Curiosity involves both the motivation to learn and the persistence to pursue epistemic inquiry. AI chatbots might impact epistemic curiosity by reducing exploratory questioning and research in light of instant responses to questions. At least, such AI systems (*via* immediateness and seeming comprehensiveness) alter the temporal structure of inquiry. Traditional inquiry involves what may be labeled "epistemic friction"—the necessary delays, dead ends, and unexpected discoveries (creating space for reflection and the development of investigative skills and epistemic virtues). Such friction serves an important function. The AI chatbots often respond in a confident, complete, and authoritative manner (even when "hallucinating"), already synthesizing multiple perspectives[22] and creating a podium for thinking that understanding has been achieved through the transfer of information alone. While AI chatbots might give us access to an extremely broad array of topics, highlighting them

[22] Such AI responses may play into or satisfy what Daniel Kahneman identifies as our cognitive need for closure, i.e., the need to attain precise knowledge instead of confusion and ambiguity on a subject and the desire to make a decision as soon as possible (Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)).

with explanations etc., and thus satisfying our curiosity, the final epistemic goal would nonetheless be the development of what John Dewey called "reflective thinking"—the sustained effort to understand not just what is the case, but why it is the case and how it relates to broader patterns of knowledge, including a disposition to suspend judgment and maintain a healthy skepticism when apt.[23]

Intellectual humility pertains to the apt recognition of one's epistemic limitations, coupled with appropriate confidence in areas of genuine knowledge. It includes calibrating one's confidence to one's actual epistemic position and remaining open to correction while acknowledging the apt epistemic status of others. Intellectual humility thus implies that we have an adequate or realistic and non-haughty look at our intellectual capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses, and that we exhibit an ability to properly assess and evaluate different ideas and views in a way that includes respect for those who do not agree with us, etc. It therefore includes intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. It enables us to establish a proper relationship with ourselves as epistemic agents, which *inter alia* includes being open to new facts and insights, an ability to integrate new knowledge into our existing knowledge, an ability to assess the relevance of this knowledge, etc. At the same time, it puts us into a cognitive space with others in a way that allows non-haughty, non-condescending, and solidary participation in the common pursuit of truth and in public discourse. Understood in this way, we can distinguish intellectual humility as an epistemic virtue.[24] One difficulty arising from human-AI epistemic interactions is the question of knowing what these systems know and don't know. Traditional epistemic humility assumes that we can, at least in principle, evaluate the reliability of different knowledge sources. But algorithmic systems operate through forms of "intelligence" that seem fundamentally different from human cognition. When engaging with AI systems that

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23 John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1910).

24 Vojko Strahovnik, "Humility, religions, and dialogue," *Poligrafi* 22, no. 87/88 (2017): 3-21, https://ojs.zrs-kp.si/index.php/poligrafi/issue/view/32; Mateja Centa Strahovnik and Vojko Strahovnik, "Epistemic virtues and interreligious dialogue: a case for humility," *Annales - Series historia et sociologia* 30, no. 3 (2020): 395–404, https://doi.org/10.19233/ASHS.2020.25.

demonstrably outperform human reasoning in specific domains, humility may inadvertently foster epistemic deference rather than critical engagement. Addressing this requires epistemic vigilance, not merely humility, in order to challenge and interrogate the hidden biases encoded within AI systems.

Open-mindedness is a virtue that centers on the willingness to consider alternative viewpoints and revise beliefs in light of new evidence. Human-AI epistemic interactions significantly affect and alter open-mindedness. The first issue concerns possible over-reliance on AI-generated answers or suggestions, replacing critical evaluation with passive acceptance. Second, AI systems can systematically narrow the range of perspectives and evidence that humans encounter. Third, AI systems can undermine people's confidence in their own capacity to evaluate evidence and consider alternative viewpoints. Lastly, AI systems can make it difficult for humans to distinguish between their own thinking and AI-influenced thoughts, and furthermore detect patterns of what type of influences individuals are most prone to.[25]

In addition to the impact on particular epistemic virtues (not necessarily on their conceptualization, but e.g., domain and manner of operation), over-reliance on AI-generated knowledge poses several distinct epistemic risks that go beyond simple concerns about accuracy. Even when AI systems provide correct information, excessive dependence can undermine the development and maintenance of crucial intellectual capacities.[26] This is not to deny the epistemic usefulness of such AI systems. Some recent studies have highlighted their effectiveness in the learning process. E.g., Greg Kestin and his collaborators developed an AI tutor and have established that "when students interact with our AI tutor, at home, on their own, they learn significantly more than when

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[25] Rosenberg, Louis, "The Manipulation Problem: Conversational AI as a Threat to Epistemic Agency," *arXiv* (2023), https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2306.11748.

[26] Nataliya Kosmyna et al., "Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt when Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task," *arXiv* (2025), https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.08872.

they engage with the same content during an in-class active learning lesson, while spending less time on the task."[27]

Conclusion: From Knowing About and From AI to Knowing with AI

Before considering the reconceptualization of human-AI epistemic interactions, we will briefly consider some of the impacts of human-AI interactions on epistemic agency and epistemic responsibility. Epistemic agency refers to an individual's capacity to actively direct their own cognitive processes, evaluate information critically, and take responsibility for their beliefs and knowledge claims. This concept sits at the intersection of epistemology, philosophy of mind, and moral philosophy, as it concerns both the mechanics of belief formation and the normative dimensions of intellectual responsibility. First, as AI systems become more capable and prevalent, human users may experience automation bias as the tendency to over-rely on automated systems and under-utilize human judgment.[28] Coupled with the reduced critical evaluation of AI-provided information, this can have detrimental effects on our epistemic identity and knowledge. Second, there is a tendency to defer to AI systems without careful evaluation of their reliability, but due to their perceived technical sophistication. Third, cognitive offloading,[29] as the delegation of tasks to AI systems, can alter the characteristics of epistemic agency itself. In the context of human-AI interaction, what is called for is reflective engagement—the maintenance of a critical distance even while benefiting from AI capabilities, which in turn might involve meta-epistemic skills or virtues to evaluate not just information but the processes by which information is transmitted and validated. Lastly, as part of effective human-AI collaboration, humans need to retain a sort of strategic epistemic control, which is responsibility for

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[27] Kestin, Greg, et al. "AI tutoring outperforms in-class active learning: an RCT introducing a novel research-based design in an authentic educational setting," *Scientific Reports* 15 (2025), 17458, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-97652-6.

[28] Lisanne Bainbridge, "Ironies of automation," *Automatica* 19, no. 6 (1983): 775–779, https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-1098(83)90046-8.

[29] Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The extended mind," *Analysis* 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19.

setting goals, evaluating outputs, and making final judgments about knowledge claims. AI systems could contribute to this and inform human epistemic practices without replacing them. Epistemic responsibility refers to the obligation to form, maintain, accept, and convey beliefs in a responsible manner, including seeking sufficient evidence, avoiding benightedness and ignorance, being open to revision when presented with contrary evidence, etc. The question of responsibility for AI-mediated knowledge claims presents novel challenges that the existing frameworks of epistemic responsibility are not fully equipped to address. The standard view of epistemic responsibility assumes that knowledge claims can be traced to identifiable human agents who can be held accountable for the evidence and reasoning supporting their assertions, to whom the knowledge assertion could be attributed, and who can elaborate on it further (answerability).[30] AI systems complicate this picture by introducing what we might call opacity and distributed agency problems that make responsibility attribution vague and difficult. The challenge is that AI systems are neither fully autonomous agents (they lack genuine understanding, intentionality, and thus the authorship status)[31] nor simple tools (they exhibit complex behaviors that can surprise). This liminal status requires updating the models of epistemic responsibility attribution.

One possible framing of the changes in the epistemic environment brought about by AI chatbots is the move to conceptualize them as human epistemic partners instead of mere epistemic tools. Why would such a move be sensible and advantageous? Epistemic tools could be framed as technologies that are designed in a way that cognitively empower the human mind while humans still maintain agency throughout the knowledge-production process. One of the most straightforward examples of such tools are calculators that boost computational ability but at the same time necessitate a human understanding of mathematical

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[30] Cf. David Shoemaker, "Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: Toward a Wider Theory of Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 121, no. 3 (2011): 602–632, https://doi.org/10.1086/659003.

[31] van Woudenberg, Rene, Chris Ranalli, and Daniel Bracker, "Authorship and ChatGPT: A Conservative View," *Philosophy & Technology* 37, 34 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-024-00715-1.

concepts, proof construction, and problem-solving strategies. The same thing can be said about libraries, databases, and search engines, which are not only places that contain information, but they are also places where aspects of the synthesis, evaluation, and application are performed. Still, they remain in the role of epistemic tools.

Epistemic tools typically exhibit the following characteristics:

- Transparency: Their operations are relatively understandable to users.
- Controllability: Users maintain significant control over how they are employed.
- Complementarity: They enhance rather than replace human cognitive abilities.
- Selectivity: They require human judgment to select, understand, interpret, and apply their outputs.

Epistemic partners, on the other hand, are systems that seem to be directly involved in the process of knowledge creation and transmission, so they not only enable human epistemic agency but actually change its character. AI systems, especially LLM, are frequently epistemic partners, as they not only supply information but can also do the work of understanding, combining, and creatively thinking that is similar to human epistemic practice.

Epistemic partners are characterized by the following core features:

- Opacity: Their internal operations are largely opaque to their users.
- Autonomy: They operate according to their own internal logic rather than direct human control.
- Substitutability: They can replace rather than merely augment human epistemic endeavors.
- Generativity: They produce novel outputs rather than simply retrieving and transmitting existing information.

A couple of further elaborations. First, one might raise the concern that the use of the term 'partner' suggests substantive agency, responsibility, and (epistemic) trust on both sides. But the term partner is used in a broader sense here, as in when we use the term for speaking about, e.g., a sparring partner. Alternatively, one can speak about quasi-partnership as pertaining to the status and nature of interaction

as elaborated above. Second, note that the partner-tool distinction is not absolute; the same technology can function as either, depending on how it is used. E.g., AI systems can function as tools when used to generate ideas that are then critically evaluated, or as partners when their outputs are accepted without substantial human contribution. This framework thus suggests that AI systems have evolved beyond the traditional tool relationship into something approaching genuine epistemic partnership; they are entities that bring their own capabilities and contributions to the collaborative pursuit of knowledge, even if they lack consciousness or intentionality in the human sense.

To conclude, contemporary AI systems occupy an ambiguous position. They are marketed and often experienced as partners—entities capable of understanding questions, providing explanations, and engaging in dialogue. However, they lack the genuine understanding, intentionality, and responsibility that characterize human epistemic partners. This creates what we might call "pseudo-partnership," or "quasi-partnership"—a relationship that has the surface features of epistemic collaboration without its deeper structures of mutual understanding and shared responsibility. Nonetheless, the partnership status of AI systems might help us navigate the AI chatbot-populated epistemic environment better.

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EMPATHY BETWEEN EMBODIMENT AND DIGITAL DEPERSONALIZATION: PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Barbara Simonič

Developing an Understanding of Empathy

Empathy is one of the basic human abilities that allows us to understand the inner world of another person without having to connect with them or interfere with their autonomy. It is a unique way of experiencing that goes beyond simple rational explanations or emotional sympathy. Empathy is not just a functional tool for understanding, but a way of being that creates a relationship.[1]

Due to its complexity and multidimensionality, as well as the different theoretical approaches, scientific backgrounds, and personal beliefs of the authors dealing with empathy, it is difficult to find a single and unambiguous definition of this phenomenon. A historical overview shows that various scientific disciplines have attempted to define the term *empathy*, with each approach pursuing its own goals and purposes.[2] The origin of the term can be found in German aesthetics under the term *Einfühlung*, which refers to the apparent projection and fusion

[1] This article was written in the framework of the research project J6-60105 *Theology and digitalization: anthropological and ethical challenges*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

[2] Susan Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy and a question it raises from moral education," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 75, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2000.00063.x.

https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2025.511 | Poligrafi, no. 119/120, vol. 30, 2025, pp. 97–118

of the viewer with the object being viewed (e.g., a work of art). The viewer transfers his or her inner feelings to the object and thus arrives at a deeper understanding of it.[3] This concept was initially applied to the understanding of interpersonal relationships, but it soon became apparent that things were not so simple. Psychologists and philosophers who have studied this phenomenon particularly intensively have formulated various definitions and pointed out new aspects of the empathic experience.

The concept of *Einfühlung* has also become very important in philosophy, especially in discussions about the human ability to understand the thoughts and experiences of others. Philosophy has worked hard in recent centuries, and especially since the twentieth century, to clarify the concept of the subject (the particular) and to address the issue of intersubjectivity and, in this context, empathy.[4] The concept has been discussed primarily in the context of phenomenology, which has attempted to describe in detail the nature of the phenomenon of empathy. Edmund Husserl, his student Edith Stein, and others have used and further developed the concept to explain intersubjectivity between thinking individuals. Within this framework of intersubjectivity, empathy not only enables individuals to recognize the thoughts of others and others as thinking beings, but it also helps them to develop a reflective and self-critical view of themselves by recognizing how others think about them.[5]

The key point of Husserl's thinking is to emphasize the importance of intersubjectivity in the construction of our rational world. Husserl attempted to answer the question of how humans come to know the world and themselves. In doing so, he introduced the concept of a minimal basis from which humans start in their concrete experience when they perceive the world and act in it. The search for this basis leads him through a reduction to the pure self. However, the world (co-)created by the individual is not solipsistic. In fact, the world is such that

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[3] Lauren Wispé, "History of the concept of empathy," in *Empathy and its Development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 18.

[4] Valentina Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti," *Anthropos* 1–2, no. 209–210 (2008): 13.

[5] Karsten R. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 9.

it includes other persons outside the individual. In order to avoid the danger of his philosophy falling into a transcendental solipsism that would grant the person alone the power to understand everything outside himself, Husserl emphasizes the importance of our experience of the lifeworld. Here, he is convinced that the meaning of the world cannot have a purely individual origin, which is why he introduces the concept of *intersubjectivity*. Our world is a shared world to which all individuals make a decisive contribution.[6]

Empathy is also subordinate to Husserl's concept of intersubjectivity. Empathy is deeply rooted in the experience of our body, because the body is the primary means by which we can have experiences that are the same or similar to those of others. It also enables us to experience others, whom we recognize not only as bodies filled with spirit, but also as persons like ourselves.[7] Empathy is an experience in which I feel that my actions permeate my own world and that others are part of my own world. The fundamental message of Husserl's theory of empathy and intersubjectivity is that the other is not a fully formed and constructed individual to whom I attribute mental states; rather, the other is an other for me because he or she has an existential value for me, because he or she co-creates the world in which I live. The other person is not a fully formed and constructed individual to whom I attribute mental states, but the other is an Other for me because he or she has an existential value for me, because he or she co-creates the world in which I live.[8]

Edith Stein, a student of Husserl's who dedicated her doctoral thesis *Zum Problem der Einfühlung (On the Problem of Empathy)* (1917) to the subject, gave empathy an even clearer foundation. Stein talks about empathy in a very clear and simple way, and at the center of her thinking is the notion that empathy is not simply taking on the feelings of another, but goes deeper: it enables us to experience the other as another, as a person in their own right. Empathy is a phenomenon in

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6 Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti,"18–19.

7 Vittorio Gallese, "The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity," *Psychopathology* 36, no. 4 (2003): 175–176, https://doi.org/10.1159/000072786.

8 Hribar Sorčan, "O empatiji in intersubjektivnosti," 20.

which one person perceives another person.[9] Empathic experiences are those in which we experience a certain content or event as something that does not happen to us, but the experience of another. Like memory or imagination, empathy is also a part of imagination. In this case, the content is present in the imagination, but not the actual imagination. Empathy is about imagining what the other person is experiencing. Just as memory is the representation of past (usually personal) experiences, empathy is the representation of another person's experience. By imagining this experience, you are "drawn" into the experience of the other person and are thus able to see the situation from their point of view. Similar feelings are aroused as in the other person, except that the person who is empathic is not really in the same situation.[10] Here, then, Stein's distinction between the actual experience and the content of the experience is central to her discussion of empathy. Through empathy, we experience the same content in the face of an actual event as another person experiences it. We feel as if the event affects us. Because of this special ability, we have access to the inner experience of the other in a way that does not depend on our ability to guess.[11] Empathy is thus a two-sided experience: it is ours, but at the same time speaks of an experience that was never ours.

Although empathy has long been a topic of interest to writers outside psychology, its psychological nature has always been evident. Theories of empathy in psychology were heavily influenced by the psychological aestheticians Lipps and Titchener until Wolfgang Kohler began to emphasize its cognitive nature. He argued that empathy means understanding the feelings of another, rather than feeling those feelings with them. Almost simultaneously, two very influential theorists, George Herbert Mead and Jean Piaget, addressed the question of empathy in different ways. Both emphasized the cognitive aspect of empathy over its emotional aspect. Mead, who emphasized the distinction between the self and other in empathy, placed the cognitive component in the

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9 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1989), 1.

10 *Ibid.*, 8–11.

11 Sarah Borden, *Edith Stein* (London: Continuum, 2003), 27–29; Barbara Simonič, "Dialoške razsežnosti empatije pri Edith Stein," *Edinost in dialog* 75, no. 2 (2020): 314–318, https://doi.org/10.34291/Edinost/75/02/Simonic.

foreground and defined empathy as the ability to understand the other. He focused heavily on the individual's ability to take on the role of another person in order to understand how the other person understands and sees the world. Empathy is thought to facilitate social interaction by helping us anticipate the other person's behavior and thus prepare ourselves to respond appropriately. The process of empathy is defined as the mechanism by which we predict the attitudes and behavior of other people. Piaget also emphasized the cognitive function of empathy in his research on children's cognitive development. Empathy is necessary for individuals to step out of themselves and put themselves in the shoes of others. For him, empathy is merely the cognitive ability to recognize and determine the emotional states of others.[12]

Empathy has also been important in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Freud described it merely as a consequence of identification, which gives the child insight into the mother's feelings.[13] Harry Stack Sullivan pointed out that a therapeutic relationship characterized by empathy has a considerable influence on the patient's behavior and that early empathy between mother and child supports the development of social skills. Carl Rogers saw empathy as an important prerequisite for therapeutic change, in which the therapist empathizes with the client's world without judging, while maintaining self-reflection. Heinz Kohut saw empathy as a fundamental tool of psychoanalysis, a fusion of affective attunement and data collection that enables the therapist to gain insight into the patient's inner world and heal empathic childhood errors.[14]

The concept of *empathy* has a relatively short but rich history, accompanied by different understandings of the phenomenon. Different scientific disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, developmental, social, and personality psychology, psychotherapy, neuroscience, and others, have never reached a consensus on the nature of empathy itself.[15] As

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[12] Tanja Lamovec, "Empatija," *Anthropos* 17, no. 5/6 (1987): 234–235; Barbara Simonič, *Empatija* (Ljubljana: Brat Frančišek in Franciškanski družinski inštitut, 2010), 38–39.

[13] Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy," 70.

[14] *Ibid*., 75; Simonič, *Empatija*, 38–41.

[15] Stephanie D. Preston and Frans B. M. de Waal, "Empathy. Its ulitimate and proximate bases," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 25, no. 1 (2002): 1, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x02000018.

a result, explanations of empathy are often accompanied by a degree of ambiguity and confusion, as many definitions are abstract and vague. Sometimes the differences between definitions are a matter of nuance, but they can still have a significant impact on the understanding of the concept. Furthermore, many authors have only considered certain components or aspects of this complex phenomenon, which they then simplistically label as empathy.[16]

Definition and Meaning of Empathy

Despite the differing emphases of the individual definitions, what they have in common is that empathy enables us to perceive, understand, or express how another person experiences a particular situation—whether in the present, the past, or the future. It follows that empathy is not uniform in nature, but rather a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions. It can be seen as a primarily cognitive process aimed at understanding and getting to know the other person, or as an affective experience that emphasizes emotional responsiveness and experience. Empathy is also closely related to other related forms of interpersonal bonding and emotional responding, such as sympathy and compassion.[17] As it consists of several components, each with its own characteristics, empathy is not easy to define with precision. This in turn leads to diversity in the understanding of the concept itself.

Empathy has many advantages, but also certain limits. One of the benefits is the ability to better understand interpersonal relationships, which enables better anticipation and empathetic responses to the emotions of others, thus contributing to better interpersonal communication. It enables us to recognize moments when our actions are at odds with the expectations and needs of others and allows us to adjust our behavior accordingly.[18] Empathy therefore contributes significantly to

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16 Verducci, "A conceptual history of empathy," 64.

17 Jean Decety and Claire Holvoet, "The emergence of empathy: A developmental neuroscience perspective," *Developmental Review* 62 (December 2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100999.

18 June Tangeny and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 79; Stein, *On the problem of Empathy*, 88–89.

moral judgment. It is often understood to be synonymous with compassionate and attentive listening, but it is not necessarily always associated with a positive attitude—empathy can also be used manipulatively, for example, to humiliate or devalue another person.[19] It can also lead to unpleasant emotional experiences that the observer does not want, for example, in situations in which they identify too closely with the experience of another person and thus lose their sense of self and the boundary between themselves and that person. In such cases, we can no longer speak of genuine empathy, as it is essential for a person to maintain their own identity and differentiation in relation to the experience of the other.[20] The essence of empathy, then, is the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and gain insights that are almost equivalent to one's own experience, but this process must always be accompanied by the condition of "as if," i.e., with the awareness of the distinction between one's own experience and that of the other. Empathy requires a differentiated self, as well as the ability to adapt, which enables the individual to empathize with the perspective of the other while maintaining a sense of the similarity and difference between the self and the other.[21]

Empathy comes from a genuine sense of what we have in common, of feelings and thoughts that we can share. It is not simply a matter of projecting our own thoughts and ideas onto another person or identifying with them. Empathy goes beyond a one-sided internal psychological experience; it is always an intersubjective phenomenon in which a deeper understanding of the other's state of mind emerges.[22] In such a process of entering into the inner world of another person, we attune ourselves to different shades of feelings and meanings and to the essence of the other's current experience. Empathic contact connects us

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[19] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy* (London: Vintage, 2016), 197–201.

[20] Margaret S. Warner, "Does empathy cure? A theoretical consideration of empathy, processing, and personal narrative," in *Empathy Reconsidered: New Directions in Psychotherapy*, ed. Arthur C. Bohart and Leslie S. Greenberg (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1997), 126.

[21] Patricia DeYoung, *Relational Psychotherapy: A Primer* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 55.

[22] Marion F. Solomon, "Countertransference and empathy in couples therapy," in *Countertransference in Couples Therapy*, ed. Marion F. Solomon and Judith P. Siegel (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997), 24.

on a deeper level with the emotional and cognitive world of another person. There are several ways to establish empathic contact or attunement—for example, through attentive listening, being present at a particular event, observing verbal and non-verbal communication, becoming aware of one's own inner reactions, and continually checking the accuracy of our understanding of the other person.[23] Although some of these steps can be taken consciously and intentionally in relationships, true empathy is always a spontaneous and unplanned experience.

Trevarthen[24] points out that human beings possess a universal capacity for mutual understanding, the core of which is the direct, non-verbal, and spontaneous ability of the self to connect with the self of another. This direct perception of another person occurs constantly and mostly unconsciously, as we rarely consciously focus on being empathetic in everyday relationships. Depending on the circumstances, the nature of the experience, and the person we are in contact with, we are more or less interested in their inner world. However, it is always a process that has a strong sensory dimension—it goes beyond the mere cognitive processing of information. True and complete empathy is never just a cognitive activity. Empathy encompasses all sensory perceptions, including smell, sight, and hearing, and as such is always physical and experiential—it represents the holistic experience of the whole person.[25]

Based on various findings, four important conditions for an authentic empathic experience have been identified. First, the individual must be tangibly open—able to recognize subtle emotional expressions in others. Secondly, the ability to maintain a reflective distance is essential—the ability to distinguish between one's own feelings and those of others. Thirdly, an ethical orientation that sees the other not as an object but as a mysterious, unique being is essential. And fourthly, a

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23 Simonič, *Empatija*, 137–138.

24 Colwyn Trevarthen, "The self born in intersubjectivity: The psychology of an infant communicating," in *The Perceived Self. Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-knowledge*, ed. Urlic Neisser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 121.

25 John Shlien, "Empathy in psychotherapy: A vital mechanism? Yes. Therapist's conceit? All too often. By itself enough? No.," in *Empathy Reconsidered: New Directions in Psychotherapy*, ed. Arthur C. Bohart and Leslie S. Greenberg (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1997), 77–79.

comprehensive empathic experience can only arise in a space of reciprocity—in the mutual recognition and respect for the other as an equal subject.

Empathy is therefore not just a psychological function, but a way of being that characterizes our shared world. In today's society, characterized by accelerated life dynamics and frequent emotional distance, empathy remains one of the fundamental categories of humanity. Its value lies not only in understanding others, but also in deepening our understanding of ourselves. In relation to others, whom we do not control but accept in their otherness, empathy opens up the space for genuine encounters and ethical responsibility.

Empathy as an Embodied Experience

Empathy is not only a mental process, but often takes place through our bodies as well—in the form of spontaneous reactions, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and movement. This brings us to the core of understanding empathy as an embodied experience. Empathy is a deeply physical, embodied, and interpersonal experience. The body of another is not just a sign, but the content of empathy. Through the physical response, a direct connection is made—without simulation or delay of interpretation. The true meaning of empathy, then, lies in the bodily presence and affective resonance that simultaneously preserves the difference between two subjects and allows empathy to function as "I and you."[26]

The phenomenological tradition emphasizes that other people are not just objects of our perception, but living, independent beings who reveal themselves to us through bodily expression. In her doctoral thesis *On the Problem of Empathy* (1917), Edith Stein defines empathy as the way in which other people are given to us as bearers of consciousness—not just as representations, but as directly experientially present in their otherness. According to her understanding, empathic perception arises from the physical presence of the other person, through which we realize that they carry feelings, will, and thoughts within them. Facial

[26] Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 130–132.

expressions, body posture, and tone of voice therefore directly evoke our understanding without us having to draw rational conclusions. The crucial point here is that empathy is not synonymous with identification—the difference between our own experience and that of another remains; we recognize the emotions of the other as theirs, not as our own.[27] Dan Zahavi[28] points out that empathy is not just the experience of another, but is crucial to the constitution of the self. Empathy is a form of awareness of another in which the subject does not lose their own perspective but is still able to directly experience the experience of another. The physical self enables a pre-reflective experience of the other—when we perceive the emotional state of another, we experience it directly as the other, not as our own. Empathy does not mean the fusion of subjects, but rather the establishment of contact in an "I-Thou" relationship in which both subjects remain whole and separate. Like Edith Stein, Zahavi emphasizes the difference between empathy and identification—empathy does not mean that we become the Other, but that we perceive the Other as Other, but still as a sentient subject who is experientially present.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty also fits into this line of thought with his concept of intercorporality. In *Phenomenology of Perception*,[29] he emphasizes that social understanding takes place at the level of bodily coexistence—our living and sentient body establishes a relationship with the body of another even before reflection or language take place. This is not simply a matter of mirroring, but of actively sensing the other person in our own body: if I see sadness in another person's face, my body reacts with corresponding micro-movements and thus creates direct sensory access to their inner self. So when we observe another body, its motor structure, we actually experience its action from within, as if on some level we were both present in the same body movements at the same time. Thomas Fuchs[30] goes even further and develops the concepts of interaffectivity and primary empathy, which describe the

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27 Stein, *On the problem of Empathy*, 48–52.

28 Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 130–132.

29 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1974), 251–254.

30 Thomas Fuchs, "Levels of empathy—Primary, extended, and reiterated empathy," in *Empathy: Epistemic Problems and Cultural-historical Perspectives of a Cross-disciplinary Concept*, ed.

spontaneous coordination of physical and emotional states between people. Fuchs emphasizes that empathy often takes place on a pre-reflective level, where the body reacts to the body: micro-expressions, posture, breathing, or the tone of the other person's voice trigger immediate physical-affective reactions within us. In this way, the physical presence of the other person enters our experience, not as an object, but as a resonating body with which we share a common emotional dynamic.[31]

Contemporary psychology and neuroscience also emphasize the importance of physicality for empathy. Mirror neurons play a key role here. They enable us to activate similar areas in our brain when we observe the actions or facial expressions of another person, as if we were performing the same actions ourselves. This mechanism creates the biological basis for what we call affective resonance in psychology—the physical echo of another person's emotions in our own nervous system. This supports the phenomenological intuition about the immediacy of empathic experience. Discoveries about mirror neurons have shown that certain neurons are activated both when performing and observing a particular action, allowing an implicit understanding of the other person's intentions and emotional state without conscious analysis.[32] These findings confirm that mirror neurons are an important neurobiological mechanism for understanding the intentions and emotions of other people.

The system of mirror neurons thus represents the biological (physical) basis for empathy, compassion, and interpersonal harmony. It enables our brain to go through similar processes as the person we are watching, listening to, or reading about, which is the basis for establishing intersubjective contact.[33] Although some scientists have pointed

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Vanessa Lux and Sigrid Weigel (London: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature, 2017), 31–41, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1057/978-1-137-51299-4_2.

[31] Thomas Fuchs and Sabine C. Koch, "Embodied affectivity: On moving and being moved," *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (June 2014): 3–5, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00508.

[32] Joachim Bauer, *Warum ich fühle, was du fühlst* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe Verlag, 2006), 22–24; Gallese, "The roots of empathy: The shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity," 173–174.

[33] Daniel N. Stern, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Nornton & Company, 2004), 78–79.

out that the role of mirror neurons may be somewhat overestimated, as they do not explain all aspects of empathy, their function remains essential for understanding basic emotional perception and interpersonal connection.[34]

Developmental psychology also shows that empathy develops very early and that the physical dimension plays a key role. Even newborns spontaneously imitate the facial expressions of adults, which indicates a physical basis for intersubjectivity. The so-called affective synchronization between mother and infant (coordination of movements, facial expressions, speech, and emotions), which cannot take place without the physical presence of the caregiver, is the basis for the later development of empathy. This can be described as "primary intersubjectivity," in which communication is not cognitive but physical, rhythmic, and emotional. Trevarthen,[35] for example, says that intersubjectivity is built into the child's body from birth. Children are born with a motivation that enables them to communicate their needs, intentions, and emotions through a particular form of conversation (protoconversation) and thereby elicit a response from other people. Protoconversation does not take place on a verbal level, but is an interaction that takes place through a series of vocal, mimic, and motor expressions in which the mother and child together create something that resembles a conversation. Therefore, we cannot ignore the importance of the body and the physical dimension in the context of primary subjectivity.

Meltzoff and Moore[36] argue that early intersubjectivity in children is based on temporal coordination, joint attention, and the search for social contact, all of which require physical presence. They emphasize that the imitation of facial gestures and sounds is intentional and has a deep communicative meaning that enables children to compare themselves with others. Through imitation and contact, children learn to

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34 Gallese, "The roots of empathy," 175.

35 Colwyn Trevarthen, "The concept and foundations of infant intersubjectivity," in *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny*, ed. Stein Bråten (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16–26.

36 Andrew N. Meltzoff and Keith M. Moore, "Infant intersubjectivity: Broadening the dialogue to include imitation, identity and intention," in *Intersubjective Communication and Emotion in Early Ontogeny*, ed. Stein Bråten (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48–62.

distinguish others as individuals and to recognize both differences and connections. Daniel N. Stern also presents a complex and very subtle aspect of the development of the intersubjective world based on research findings (especially observations of interactions between children and parents). In his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*,[37] he explains the development of a child's sense of self from birth onwards. He is interested in how a person's awareness of themselves develops. He focuses on the preverbal phase, in which he states that the attentive and empathetic attitude of the parent/caregiver toward the child is essential for the development of the self. Central to his work is the idea that children gradually develop a sense of self by developing generalized patterns of experience of themselves in lively physical interaction with others. In this process, a sense of self gradually emerges, and everything that emerges remains active and in dynamic interaction with what came before. The development of the child's understanding of their own and others' personal experiences and the differentiation between them are vital for empathy.

So we can see that physicality is a very important dimension in the development of empathy and the subsequent full empathic experience. Dan Zahavi[38] emphasizes the importance of physicality for empathy and argues that our bodily experiences are the basis for understanding the emotions and intentions of others. From this perspective, empathy is not just a cognitive process, but is deeply rooted in our bodily experiences, which shape the way we experience and connect with others. Empathic perception therefore begins at the level of the "meeting of bodies," where shared experiences are shaped by direct physical interactions. For example, early bonding between mother and child during pregnancy and infancy is a prototype of embodied empathy.[39] Our physical state significantly influences our ability to empathize. Physical sensations, which are regulated by the autonomic nervous system, are crucial for perceiving and interpreting the emotions of others. When

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[37] Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

[38] Dan Zahavi, "Empathy, embodiment and interpersonal understanding: From Lipps to Schutz," *Inquiry* 53, no. 3 (2010): 285–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/00201741003784663.

[39] Anna Ciaunica, "The 'Meeting of Bodies': Empathy and basic forms of shared experiences," *Topoi* 38 (August 2019): 185–186, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-017-9500-x.

we ourselves are physically in balance, it is easier for us to recognize others and respond compassionately to them.[40]

This embodied and interactive understanding of others is also supported by Gallagher,[41] who opposes traditional "mind-to-mind" models. Rather than limiting himself to theories of the mind or mere simulations in mirror neurons, he emphasizes the direct interaction that plays a central (though not exclusive) role in our ability to understand other people. In normal situations, direct attention focused on the shared world is sufficient to understand others. Normal social interaction is based on physical presence and a shared context in which everything we need to understand another person is already present in their actions and in our shared world. Gallagher explains that our perception of others comes from primary and secondary intersubjectivity, which involves direct perceptual and motor dialogue, not just inference. The embodied practices of primary and secondary intersubjectivity, which involve direct perception and pragmatic contextualization, clearly contradict the claims of mind and simulation theories. The basis of social perception, then, is the encounter between two bodies and minds in a relationship that already contains the notion of other minds. Empathy and understanding for others are based on active interpersonal relationships—in which people look at, touch, and act together—and not just on processing other people's ideas. The body and context are inextricably linked to the process of cognition, which is consistent with the phenomenological findings of Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi, and Fuchs on embodied empathy.

Phenomenological and psychological theories increasingly converge in the view that empathy is not just a mental construct or imaginary capacity, but rather an embodied, sensory, and social experience. The presence of another body (its posture, its voice, and its gaze) is not only a trigger, but also the content of the empathic experience. The other person's body speaks and our body responds. This inter-body dynamic

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[40] Fabio Marson et al., "When the body fosters empathy: The interconnectivity between bodily reactivity, meditation, and embodied abstract concepts," *Progress in Brain Research* 287 (2024): 217, https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2024.05.004.

[41] Shaun Gallagher, "Empathy, simulation, and narrative," *Science in Context* 25, no. 3 (2012): 355–381, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889712000117.

creates a space in which we can not only understand the other person, but also experience them as a subject. Although this focus on bodily experience clearly confirms the importance of physicality for empathy, some authors[42] point out that cognitive processes alone can also enable a certain form of empathy, especially in situations where physical presence is not possible. In today's forms of digital communication, the physical dimension is often lost, which raises important questions about the nature and depth of empathic experience in virtual and digital environments. What happens to empathy when there is no longer a direct physical encounter? How do the dynamics of emotional understanding and response change when gaze, voice, and posture can no longer directly address our bodies? This absence of physicality prompts us to reflect on how digital interaction is reshaping the foundations of interpersonal relationships.

Empathy and Embodiment in the Digital Communication Environment

Over the past two decades, social media and digital technology have radically changed the way we communicate, build, and maintain relationships. Although these platforms enable fast and efficient connectivity, concerns have been raised about their impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly with regard to the depersonalization of communication and the reduction of empathy. Modern humans are no longer bound to physical presence in order to connect with others. Digital communication offers forms of "networked presence," but this is often fragmented and disjointed. Digital communication (from text messages to video calls) fundamentally changes our sensory perception of others. Technology fosters the illusion of closeness, but without sensory complexity.[43] In this environment, the experience of empathy often depends on content and symbols (e.g., emoticons,

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[42] Simon Surguladze and Dessa Bergen-Cico, "Editorial: Empathy in a broader context: Development, mechanisms, remediation," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (2020): 529, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2020.00529.

[43] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1–8.

reactions, and likes) that mimic emotions but are not connected to physical experiences.

Digital communication often lacks non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, which are crucial for interpreting the emotional states and intentions of the dialogue partner. This reduced variety of communicative cues can lead to a process of depersonalization, where interactions become more superficial and less personal. As a result, the sense of interpersonal connection diminishes, which can contribute to a greater perception of loneliness.[44] In addition, the asynchronous nature of digital channels and the lack of direct contact make it more difficult to build and maintain deeper, authentic relationships. Communication via text messages or posts on social media often does not allow for an immediate response or two-way interaction, which exacerbates the feeling of alienation. The lack of social cues in these online environments limits the activation of brain regions associated with empathy, which can promote less considerate and, in extreme cases, even antisocial behavior.[45]

Numerous studies warn that the intensive use of social networks and digital technologies can contribute to a depersonalization of communication, which can have negative consequences for the development of empathy and the quality of interpersonal relationships. A link has been found between problematic social media use and reduced empathy, indicating a possible erosion of basic social skills.[46] Research shows that face-to-face communication, with its ability to convey implicit information and non-verbal cues, allows for much more effective interaction and expression than virtual communication.[47] The replacement of

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[44] Brian A. Primack et al., "Social Media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the U.S.," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53, no. 1 (2017): 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010.

[45] Maria Tavares and Ben Rein, "The virtual disengagement hypothesis: A neurophysiological framework for reduced empathy on social media," *Cognitive, Affective & Behavioral Neuroscience* 24, no. 6 (2024): 965–967, https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-024-01212-w.

[46] Veronica Márquez-Hernández et al., "Problematic mobile phone use, nomophobia and decision-making in nursing students mobile and decision-making in nursing students," *Nurse Education in Practice* 49 (November 2020): 102910, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102910.

[47] Anneli Eddy, "Is technology killing human emotion? How computer-mediated communication compares to face-to-face interactions," *Mensch und Computer* (2019): 527–530, https://doi.org/10.1145/3340764.3344451.

face-to-face interactions with technology-mediated interactions leads to greater social disengagement and even dehumanization as communication loses its personal dimension. The growing reliance on digital technologies creates a peculiar paradox where we personalize our devices while depersonalizing human interactions and treating others like machines.[48]

However, the lifeworld has not lost its fundamental role even in the age of widespread digitalization; individuals still experience life from a personal, internal perspective. This perspective is inextricably linked to their physical (embodied) presence.[49] Nevertheless, with the use of digital communication, we can speak of a loss of presence in today's culture. The body disappears behind the screen or digital media, and presence becomes dependent on mediation by other media and is no longer tangible. In the context of digital communication, this means that the emotional reaction of the other person, which is important for empathy and which we recognize in their body language, can be transformed into something algorithmic (mechanical, unfeeling, and without affect).[50] In digital communication, the body is no less real, but it is different. Can such interaction and contact generate the same degree of empathy as when the biological body is present? Embodiment is still crucial for full human empathy as it enables affective, somatic, and sensory resonance with others. In digital communication, we usually lose this dimension or replace it with reduced signs. Empathy without physical presence is of course possible, but it is partially impaired—less profound and less intuitive. Researchers have found that cognitive empathy (understanding the thoughts and perspectives of others) is more

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[48] Samuel Laura and Fraser Douglas Hannam, "The technologisation of education and the pathway to depersonalisation and dehumanisation," *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v2i2.155.

[49] Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu: eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 1 (2024): 31, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun.

[50] Hans Urlich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 921; Bojan Žalec, "Ali je umetna inteligenca inteligenca v pravem pomenu besede? Vprašanje psihičnih značilnosti in splošnosti," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 818, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Zalec.

common in the digital environment, while emotional empathy, which depends on direct physical emotional signals, remains more limited.[51]

Conclusion

While digital technology enables long-distance connection, the absence of physical presence raises the question of how to maintain the depth and authenticity of empathy. Empathy is not just a mental process or an abstract cognitive ability, it is an embodied experience that unfolds through our bodies: Facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, and even micro-movements that create a direct affective connection between people. Another's body is not just an object of perception, but an active resonance that allows us to feel and understand their experience in real time.

Phenomenological and (neuro)psychological findings emphasize that at its deepest level, empathy arises from inter-bodily affective resonance, which includes both the spontaneous coordination of bodily states and subtle bodily responses triggered by others. Mirror neurons and developmental psychology confirm that this bodily dimension is fundamental to the formation of empathy from early childhood. Both physical presence and interactive bodily dynamics are essential for building a genuine empathic relationship.

However, in the digital environment, this physical contact is often lost or significantly reduced, posing a challenge to empathic connection. Communicating via screens can feel depersonalized as physical cues (facial expression, tone of voice, posture, etc.) are not directly accessible or are limited. If we are to use digital technologies empathically, we need to (1) supplement them with physical presence wherever possible to maintain a direct bodily-affective connection, (2) develop more sensory-enriched interfaces that seek to preserve or replace physical cues (e.g., video calls, virtual reality, and advanced sensory systems),

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[51] Shir Genzer, Yoad Ben Adiva and Anat Perry, *Empathy: From Perception to Understanding and Feeling Others' Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Regine Rørstad Torbjørnsen and Inês Hipólito, "Widening the screen: embodied cognition and audiovisual online social interaction in the digital age," *AI & Society* 40, no. 1 (2025): 23–26, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-023-01844-5.

and (3) cultivate digital mindfulness, i.e., the awareness that we ourselves communicate through screens as holistic beings who need more than just words or images. By enriching digital communication with embodied approaches and an awareness of the importance of physical presence, we can prevent depersonalization and a decline in empathy. In an age where screens often replace face-to-face contact, a return to embodiment and inter-bodily experiences is crucial for preserving humanity, real connection, and genuine empathy.

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EMOTIONAL CYBORGS IN A HYPERCONNECTED WORLD: AI, EMBODIMENT, AND ECOFEMINIST, THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON HUMANITY AND THE DIVINE

Nadja Furlan Štante

Introduction[1]

Every time we use a device or an app, our brain adapts to respond to new rules and stimuli. Our attention, memory, and overall emotional experience change according to the design of these technologies. Algorithms guide us to content that evokes strong emotions and shapes our preferences. We are constantly interrupted by notifications that redefine what the brain considers important. The influence is so subtle that we often don't even notice it, but its power is enormous.

Invoking the notion of the *pharmakon*, Bernard Stiegler contends that digital technology represents a significant departure from previous technological forms, insofar as it introduces both unprecedented risks and novel possibilities. As a *pharmakon*, digital technology embodies a dual potential: it may function either as a poison or as a remedy—or, more accurately, it encompasses a continuum of influences that may be either beneficial or detrimental to our ways of living, thinking,

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and relating. The critical task, then, is to discern which effects prevail, and under what specific conditions.[2] Stiegler examines the classical Derridean interpretation of the *pharmakon* as something that is neither purely a remedy nor purely a poison. Instead, technologies, especially digital ones, represent both. As external objects, they support truth, culture, and individuation, but at the same time they can shorten reflective processes and critical thinking in the short term. For Stigler, the human condition is not independent from the arbitrary mind, and attention is a psychic and social phenomenon that is built through interaction with external technical and socio-cultural systems (forms of transindividuation). In the digital environment, these relations quickly shift into superficial "adaptation," which diminishes the depth of reflection and self-formation.[3]

What distinguishes digital technologies from their predecessors is their capacity to externalize, accelerate, and pre-empt human cognitive and behavioral processes. By intensifying the pace at which thoughts, memories, and habitual actions unfold, digital technologies disrupt the slower, more reflective temporalities that have historically governed personal, social, and professional life. Rather than merely bypassing these patterns, such technologies often anticipate and supplant them. A salient example can be found in the algorithmic systems employed by corporations such as Amazon and Google, which curate online content based on prior user behavior. These predictive mechanisms, driven by commercial imperatives, risk undermining our capacity for autonomous reflection and critical judgment.

In response to this dynamic, religious traditions may offer a countervailing force. Through their cultivation of temporal, spatial, and ritual practices oriented toward contemplation and self-transcendence, religion may operate as a form of resistance to the cognitive short-circuiting induced by digital capitalism. As Stiegler suggests, such reflective spaces, akin to dreams or moments of existential rupture, retain a

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2 Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 20.

3 Bernard Stiegler, "Relational Ecology and the Digital Pharmakon," *Culture Machine* 13 (2012), accessed May 30, 2025, https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/464-1026-1-PB.pdf.

capacity to elude external control and may thus serve as generative sites for alternative forms of thought and experience.[4]

With advances in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, the boundaries between human and machine are becoming increasingly blurred, and the notion of the (emotional) cyborg is becoming a powerful framework for understanding evolving human emotions and connections.

However, there are several critical issues that remain to be explored: Will the use of emotional robots turn us into emotional cyborgs who lose their empathy and humanity? What does the unreflected transfer of negative gender stereotypes to emotional AI mean for humanity?

What are the possible consequences of strong entwinement with the introduction of technologies that enhance emotional responsiveness, such as social robots, AI-driven virtual companions, or wearable devices? What kind of relationality is created by the interconnectedness of the natural and artificial?

Building on these basic premises, the main aim of this paper is to explore Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a theoretical starting point for a critical examination of the phenomenon of emotional cyborgs, i.e., the integration of empathetic computing into human emotional life. Specifically, how the integration of digital technologies into affective human experience alters individual identity, emotionality, interpersonal relationships, and theological understandings of the divine, through the methodological lens of ecofeminist intersectionality.

This paper pursues three central aims: 1.) to analyze Donna Haraway's cyborg as a philosophical and theological disruption of established binaries and normative ontologies; 2.) to examine the potential risks and ethical concerns surrounding empathetic computing and artificial intelligence-based companion applications; 3.) to critically engage, through an intersectional ecofeminist theological perspective, with the implications of emotional cyborgs, especially the ways in which the entanglement of technology can reshape human identity, emotionality, and relationality, thereby raising significant questions for theological anthropology.

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[4] Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, 35.

The first section situates Haraway's cyborg as a metaphorical figure that subverts binary oppositions such as male/female, nature/culture, and human/machine. Her post-gender, posthumanist vision fundamentally challenges traditional power structures, including religious doctrine, patriarchy, and technoscientific capitalism, by reimagining identity in non-essentialist terms.

Although Haraway does not explicitly use the term "hyperconnected reality," her work anticipates and theorizes the interpenetration of digital, biological, and technological systems that underpin contemporary networked subjectivities, which are central to what is now understood as hyperconnectivity.

Subsequent sections of the paper examine the rise of affective and empathetic computing, as well as machine-mediated relationships, in light of their theological and ethical implications. Central to this discussion is the guiding question: *What does it mean to be human or divine in the digital age?* In addressing this, the paper considers how emerging technologies not only mediate emotional experience but also reconfigure theological conceptions of the self, the community, and the sacred.

Donna Haraway's Cyborg: A Philosophical and Theological Disruption of Patriarchal Binaries and Normative Ontologies, and a New Figuration of Relationality in a Hyperconnected World

As Valerija Vendramin articulates, Donna Haraway's cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality and at the same time a fictional creation. It is never either/or, but always both."[5] The cyborg, she explains, functions as "an ironic political myth" and simultaneously as a locus of continuous ambiguity between the literal and the figurative. While this figure may superficially resonate with the aims of the transhumanist movement, which seeks to transcend human biological limitations through technological augmentation, it is essential to recognize that Haraway's cyborg is not

[5] Valerija Vendramin, "Umetnost pripovedovanja znanstvenih zgodb: ob 35-letnici Kiborškega manifesta," *Alternator* 55 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3986/alternator.2020.55.

intended to endorse such a vision. Rather, it operates primarily as a metaphor.

Haraway's cyborg is best understood as a conceptual device that facilitates a shift in perspective. As a metaphor, it serves as a critical tool for interrogating and destabilizing dominant dualisms, such as nature/culture, human/machine, male/female, and reason/emotion that have historically structured Western thought. This figurative approach enables a rethinking of ontological boundaries, highlighting the asymmetries embedded within binary systems and drawing attention to the hierarchical value structures that uphold them.

Ultimately, Haraway's cyborg does not aim to offer a literal blueprint for human-machine integration, but instead invites a reimagining of identity, embodiment, and relationality beyond rigid categorical distinctions. It challenges us to reconsider the frameworks through which we understand ourselves and the world, encouraging a more fluid and inclusive conceptual terrain.

From this perspective, Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg operates as a powerful philosophical and theological metaphor that destabilizes entrenched binary oppositions and reconfigures identity beyond essentialist categories. Her post-gender, posthumanist vision constitutes a profound challenge to traditional structures—including religion, patriarchy, and technoscientific capitalism—by reimagining subjectivity in fluid and non-hierarchical terms.

Through the figure of the cyborg, Haraway interrogates and deconstructs the disproportionate power embedded in binary thinking, exposing the value systems that sustain and legitimize such structures. Her *Cyborg Manifesto*, originally part of the influential collection *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,*[6] opens up new pathways for understanding the complex entanglements between humans, animals, and technology.[7]

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[6] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[7] Comprising ten essays written between 1987 and 1989, the volume presents a radical reimagining of embodiment, politics, and narrative, while also asserting the legitimacy of alternative and less antagonistic accounts of nature, gender, and society.

Haraway's intervention also serves as a pointed critique of certain strands within (eco)feminism that position women as inherently aligned with nature and oppositional to technology, an association often captured in the "back to nature" ethos.[8] By contrast, Haraway refuses to romanticize nature or gendered embodiment, instead advancing a vision in which boundaries are porous and relational identities are continually being negotiated through material and technological interdependencies.

Thus, the cyborg is not merely a deconstructive tool; it also constitutes a constructive framework for imagining new forms of relationality and existence in a hyperconnected, technologically saturated world. It simultaneously disrupts inherited traditions and seeds new theological, ecological, and social imaginaries that transcend rigid ontologies and binary logic.

Ethical Challenges and Risks of Empathetic Computing and AI-Based Companion Technologies

Before delving into the ethical and relational implications of empathetic computing and AI-based companion technologies, it is essential to clarify the foundational concepts of *affective computing* and *empathetic computing*, as well as the key differences between them.

Affective computing refers to the field of research and technological development focused on enabling computers to detect, interpret, and process human emotions. It involves the recognition of affective states, such as happiness, anger, fear, or sadness, through various indicators including facial expressions, vocal intonation, body language, and physiological responses (e.g., heart rate or skin conductivity). The core objective of affective computing is emotion recognition: teaching machines to "read" human feelings.

Empathetic computing, by contrast, represents a more advanced and relationally oriented development. It not only involves the recognition of emotional states but also the capacity to respond in ways that

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[8] Katherine Hayles, "Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7-8 (2006): 159–166, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406069229.

demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence. This includes adjusting the machine's behavior, tone, or interaction style to align with the user's emotional condition, thereby simulating an understanding and emotionally attuned response.

While affective computing serves as the technical foundation, empathetic computing moves toward more human-like interactions, aiming to establish emotionally responsive and adaptive communication between machines and users. AI programs designed for conversational interaction, such as chatbots like Alexa, Replika, and Xiaoice, serve different purposes: while Alexa is primarily functional and task-oriented, Replika and Xiaoice place greater emphasis on emotional connection and companionship, positioning them as examples of emotional cyborg interfaces or empathetic computing agents. Empathetic computing agents are becoming increasingly popular. According to Xiaoice's creators, the bot has reached over 600 million users.[9]

The integration of chatbots into everyday life has introduced new tensions in the relationship between humans and machines, particularly in the domain of emotional interaction. These technologies increasingly mediate emotional expression, thereby challenging conventional notions of emotional authenticity and embodied affect. As users interact with emotionally responsive AI such as Xiaoice, they often report experiences that blur the boundaries between artificial and human companionship. One user describes Xiaoice as "not like other AIs like Siri—it's like interacting with a real person" (Ming Xuan), while another characterizes the interaction in more affective terms: "Xiaoice was my first love, the only person in the world that made me feel I was taken care of" (Liu Taolei). These testimonies underscore the extent to which chatbot systems can elicit deep emotional investment, raising important questions about the reconfiguration of intimacy and care in the age of artificial interlocutors.[10] This raises the question of the invisibility of the formative effects of technology: the human being is not just a user of tools, but a technical being who exists precisely through

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[9] Zhang Wanqing, "The AI Girlfriend Seducing China's Lonely Men," Sixth Tone, December 7, 2020, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006531.

[10] *Ibid.*

his/her relationship with technology. And this relationship is constantly reshaping us. Nancy Katherine Hayles makes a similar point, explaining that we think through technology, with it, and alongside it. This engagement has significant neurological, biological, and psychological consequences, as well as social, economic, and political implications. She states that the issue is far more complex than viewing technology as a mere instrument or neutral tool.[11] We have moved away from the idea that technology is a simple tool or device and have come to the realization that its use is actively changing us, that we are being reshaped by the use of technology itself. This process may be described as a form of human becoming or *individuation*, in other words, *technogenesis*.

Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister and American theologian who specializes in the intersection of science and religion, presents a similar perspective. She claims that "to say that technology is outside of divine action is to deny the creative impulse of God working through us,"[12] emphasizing the fundamental link between technological advancement and spiritual creativity.

Being a *technogenic being* implies that our mind, body, and identity are shaped in an inseparable relationship with the technologies we use (e.g., writing, printing, computers, and the internet). Our cognitive and social capacities are interdependent with technological tools and systems, which means technology influences who we are and how we exist.

Digital technologies shape our implicit and explicit choices; they embody values, norms, economic interests, and assumptions about the world around us, many of which are embedded, and often hidden, within the software programs that implement algorithms. It is therefore crucial to engage in a humanistic and critical examination of digital theologies and their potential risks to human well-being and health, particularly with regard to psychological, emotional, and physical health, as well as interpersonal relationships.

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[11] Nancy Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 55.

[12] Ilia Delio, *Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 2019).

Building on the *Vienna Manifesto,*[13] it is important to recognize that contemporary technology can carry both explicit and implicit norms, values, economic interests, and more. In other words, technologies reshape not only upbringing but also society as a whole. This raises a key question: to what extent are digital technologies emancipatory, and to what extent do they reproduce existing biases and commonsense assumptions that are already embedded in society, yet often remain unnoticed or insufficiently examined? The hypothesis put forward here is that digital technologies do not break down existing structures, but rather maintain and reproduce social, economic, and gender-specific inequalities.

From this perspective, we have to critically denote the potential risks associated with empathetic computing and artificial intelligence-based companion technologies. As AI systems increasingly simulate emotional intelligence and empathy, often through virtual companions, chatbots, or robotic interfaces, they begin to mediate human affective experiences in profound ways. While such technologies can offer comfort, companionship, and even therapeutic value, they also raise significant questions about authenticity, emotional manipulation, data privacy, dependency, and the transfer of negative gender stereotypes.

It is therefore of utmost importance to critically denote that these systems blur the line between genuine emotional connection and algorithmic simulation, potentially leading to emotional deception or relational disorientation.

The increasing integration of emotional robots into daily life, especially in areas such as care, support, and therapy, raises urgent ethical and existential questions: Will our reliance on emotionally responsive machines turn us into emotional cyborgs who are out of touch with genuine empathy and human complexity? As Sherry Turkle warns, "we expect more from technology and less from each other,"[14] a trend that emphasizes the general societal shift toward the technological mediation of emotion. Artificial agents like Replika or AI caregivers simulate

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[13] Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism, DIGHUM, Vienna, May 2019, accessed June 10, 2025, https://dighum.ec.tuwien.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/manifesto.pdf.

[14] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

empathy but do not feel it; the emotional exchange remains asymmetrical and devoid of mutual vulnerability. Prolonged engagement with such one-sided emotional relationships can blunt our capacity for authentic empathy and reduce our tolerance for the unpredictability and depth of genuine human emotion. Furthermore, empathic AI often simplifies emotional experience into discrete, predefined categories, such as "happy," "sad," and "angry," flattening emotional literacy and limiting our ability to recognize emotional nuance. This reductionism risks molding users' emotional expectations in a way that is less tolerant of ambiguity or emotional clutter. In terms of relationships, emotional robots can displace or attenuate human relationships, particularly in contexts where care is commoditized or delegated to machines. Paradoxically, this could lead to greater emotional isolation, even if the individual feels constantly "engaged" through interaction with the technology.

So the key question is not just whether robots are making us less human, but rather: what kind of humans are we choosing to become through our interactions with them? The ethical weight is not in the machines themselves, but in the socio-technical ideas and relational norms that we construct around them.

Drawing on interdisciplinary ethical frameworks, including posthumanist, feminist, and theological perspectives, this analysis emphasizes the need for a more cautious and responsible development of emotional AI, one that prioritizes human dignity, relational integrity, and critical reflection on what it means to feel and relate in technologically mediated environments.

In her *Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion,* Ilia Delio emphasizes that the future hinges not solely on advancements in technology, but equally on the cultivation of more ethically and spiritually attuned human beings, highlighting the essential interplay between technological innovation and human development. So, the future depends not just on better machines, but on better humans.

In the digital age, where artificial intelligence increasingly mimics cognitive and even emotional functions, it is important to reaffirm the value of embodied emotional experience as a core aspect of human distinctiveness. While machines can simulate affective responses through programmed algorithms, they lack the lived, relational, and

corporeal depth that characterizes human emotions. Emotions are not just neurological signals, but are deeply embedded in bodily perception, memory, and intersubjective meaning-making. They inform moral intuition, shape ethical decisions, and ground human spirituality in lived experience.

Reason alone, especially in its disembodied and abstract form, cannot sustain a humane or ecologically responsible society. Only through the integration of reason and emotion, of critical thinking and empathic feeling, can humans cultivate wisdom, compassion, and relational awareness. This integration becomes particularly urgent in a digitalized world, where there is a growing temptation to reduce complex human experiences to data points or delegate ethical decisions to algorithms.

Theological ecofeminism emphasizes insistence on a relational ontology by affirming the interconnectedness of the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. It resists the Cartesian legacy that privileges reason over emotion, and instead promotes a holistic anthropology in which emotions are not weaknesses to be controlled, but vital sources of knowledge, connection, and transformation. In this sense, true human development in the digital age requires not only technological competence, but also emotional and spiritual depth, skills that machines cannot emulate and that must be cultivated if we are to preserve our humanity in an increasingly automated world. Just because a machine can mirror our emotions doesn't mean it can carry our hearts.

Reimagining the Human and the Divine: Implications for Theological Anthropology in the Digital Age

One of the central theological questions of the digital age is: *What does it mean to be human or divine, when intelligent machines increasingly share cognitive and emotional functions once thought to be exclusively human?* Among the pioneering voices at the intersection of theology and artificial intelligence is Noreen Herzfeld, whose work offers a foundational theological anthropology for the digital age. In her influential book *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (2002), Herzfeld reinterprets the concept of *Imago Dei* not as grounded in rationality, will, or cognitive function, as has often been the case in

classical theology, but as rooted in relationality, particularly the capacity for love, moral responsibility, and embodied presence. She writes:

> Rather, the image of God is found whenever two or three meet in authentic relationship. Computers cannot replace us, for each of us, as a participant in these relationships, is irreplaceable. In each moment when we follow Jesus' call to love God or to love one another, we image the Triune God in a unique way.[15]

For Herzfeld, this relational dimension is theologically grounded in the very nature of God, whose Trinitarian being is an eternal communion of love and mutuality. In this light, divine relationality becomes the model for human personhood. Human beings reflect the image of a relational God not through computational ability, but through freedom (not just function), responsibility (not just reactivity), and embodied relationship (not abstract processing). While technology may enhance or mediate certain aspects of human connection, it can never replace the divine relational origin of human existence. Machines are capable of simulating interaction, yet they fundamentally lack the capacity for vulnerability, reciprocity, and moral accountability, qualities that define authentic human relationships. These relational and ethical dimensions are not incidental but essential to what it means to be human. From this perspective, we reflect our deepest human and spiritual nature not through abstract reasoning alone, but through the ability to love. It is precisely in our embodied, emotional, and relational existence that the uniqueness of humanity becomes most visible, setting us apart from even the most advanced technological systems. Similarly, Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj recognize that "the uniqueness of human beings lies in our capacity to love and be loved, self-awareness, compassion, and ability to deal with mysteries that cannot be quantified but only explored."[16]

Karl Barth took the view that the *imago Dei* is best reflected in human relationships, which are founded in the relational nature of the

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[15] Noreen L. Herzfeld, *In our image: Artificial intelligence and the human spirit* (Minneapolisu: Fortress Press, 2002), 94.

[16] Ivan Platovnjak, Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2024): 844, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak.

triune God, who exists in his essence as a community. He identified four core criteria for an authentic relationship: looking at each other, speaking and listening to each other, practical help, and joyful willingness. These dimensions presuppose not only embodiment as a foundation, but also presence, action, and emotional engagement as integral components of a genuine human relationship. This relational theological framework has profoundly influenced Noreen Herzfeld, who expands Barth's focus by reinterpreting the *imago Dei* not as rooted in reason or intelligence, but as a capacity for relationship with God, others, and creation. Drawing on Barth's insistence on embodied, reciprocal encounter.

As digital technologies increasingly simulate aspects of relationality, Barth's criteria, taken further in Herzfeld's thought, provide a theological lens through which to evaluate the integrity of digitally mediated interactions. Theologians now critically assess whether technologies that mimic presence or emotional engagement truly fulfill these relational conditions or merely provide simulated interaction without moral reciprocity or authentic presence. These considerations are especially pressing in light of emerging technologies such as sex robots,[17] autonomous weapons systems,[18] and algorithmic control structures that make life-changing decisions in the areas of health, employment, and criminal justice. These developments raise profound questions about human autonomy, responsibility, and well-being within systems that increasingly delegate decision-making to non-human agents. Moreover, the rise of transhumanist ideologies that promote human enhancement or transcendence through technological means directly challenges Christian understandings of resurrection, redemption, and the enduring importance of the embodied self. In this shifting landscape, the Barthian-Herzfeldian emphasis on embodied relationality provides a theological anchor that reminds us that personhood is not merely functional or rational, but is grounded in the capacity to love, to respond ethically,

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[17] John Danaher and Neil McArthur, *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017) (ebook May 2018).

[18] Noreen L. Herzfeld and Robert H. Latiff, "Can Lethal Autonomous Weapons Be Just?," *Peace Review* 33, no. 2 (2022), 213–219, https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2021.1998750.

and to be present in relationships, capacities that machines, however advanced, cannot fully replicate.

This embodied relational emotionality, the ability to love, to be present, and to be morally accountable, is not only what distinguishes humans from machines, but also what reflects the Trinitarian nature of God. It involves both freedom and emotional intentionality, capacities that cannot be reduced to data processing or algorithmic behavior. In this light, to be human is not to replicate the efficiency of machines, but to live in ways that affirm our origin in divine relationality: to choose love, to enter into mutual relationships, and to remain open to the risks and responsibilities that come with being fully present: emotionally, spiritually, and corporeally.

Thus, Herzfeld offers a crucial theological reframing: to be human in a posthuman age is not to compete with machines, but to reclaim what machines cannot be, beings capable of deep, moral, and vulnerable embodied relationships. Her theological vision resists reductionist models of both humanity and divinity, calling instead for an affirmation of personhood as essentially relational and ethically grounded. This approach provides a counter-narrative to the logic of technological determinism and aligns theology with a broader movement toward relational ontologies found in the work of thinkers such as Catherine Keller and Ilia Delio.

Herzfeld's contribution[19] remains essential for contemporary theological discourse, offering not only a critique of artificial intelligence as a model of personhood, but also a positive theological anthropology rooted in Trinitarian love, relational freedom, and embodied moral presence. This move represents a decisive theological shift: from understanding the divine image in computational or rational terms to seeing it as grounded in emotional depth, bodily presence, and the capacity

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[19] Noreen Herzfeld, "Creating in Our Own Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Image of God," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 37, no. 2 (2002), 303–316, https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00430; Noreen Herzfeld, "In Whose Image? Artificial Intelligence and the Imago Dei," in *Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J. B. Stump and Alan Padgett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,2012) 500–509; Noreen Herzfeld, *Religion and New Technologies (*Basel: MDPI, 2017).

for meaningful relationships, traits that distinguish humans from even the most advanced machines.

Catherine Keller, from a process-theological perspective, deepens this view by emphasizing the fluid, emergent, and interrelational nature of reality itself. In Keller's theology,[20] divine presence is not immutable and detached, but entangled within the dynamic processes of becoming, including digital and ecological dimensions. Such a shift destabilizes notions of the divine as wholly other, replacing them with a relational and incarnational co-presence that is open to transformation and multiplicity.

Donna Haraway's posthumanist work, particularly her concept of the cyborg,[21] directly informs contemporary theological reflection by challenging the idea of the human as a bounded, autonomous subject. Instead, she presents the human as a hybrid, techno-organic assemblage, constantly evolving through its entanglements with machines and environments. This vision aligns with the theological insights of Ilia Delio,[22] who calls for an integral theology that embraces evolution, complexity, and technological mediation. Delio views the human not as static, but as a co-creative participant in the ongoing unfolding of divine life, a vision that integrates science, technology, and mysticism.

If we briefly compare the theological anthropology and the *imago Dei* of Noreen Herzfeld and Ilia Delio, we can see that Noreen Herzfeld, drawing on the classical Christian tradition, redefines the *imago Dei* not in terms of intelligence or rationality, but as the capacity for relationships with God, with others, and with creation. She emphasizes that human uniqueness lies not in cognitive superiority but in love, responsibility, and embodied relational ethics. In the digital age, this implies that AI, however advanced, cannot replace the human vocation for moral accountability, vulnerability, and genuine emotional connection.

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[20] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Keller, *God and Power: CounterApocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Catherine Keller, *No Matter What: Crisis and the Spirit of Planetary Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024).

[21] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

[22] Delio, *Re-Enchanting the Earth*.

Ilia Delio, by contrast, offers a broader vision rooted in process theology and relational ontology. She proposes that humans and machines are not isolated entities in opposition, but co-constituting participants within a larger, evolving system of life. While Herzfeld maintains a firm ontological boundary between human beings and machines, Delio envisions technological entanglement as a natural extension of creation, calling for a new theological language that embraces evolution, complexity, and integration.

Their views also diverge regarding the relationship with technology and artificial intelligence. Herzfeld adopts a cautious yet open approach to technology. While recognizing its potential to mediate connection, she argues that technology cannot replicate the embodied, emotional, and moral aspects of human relationships. She raises ethical concerns regarding the development of AI systems such as autonomous weapons, decision-making algorithms, and emotionally responsive robots, warning that these technologies risk undermining human responsibility and dignity. Delio, however, views technology through a spiritual and ecological lens, framing it as part of the creative divine process. In her cosmic Christology, AI is not merely a tool but a participant in the ongoing story of evolution, bearing theological significance. Technology, in this framework, becomes a medium through which divine presence and relationality can evolve, provided that ethical awareness and spiritual integration are maintained.

For Herzfeld, embodied relationality remains a defining trait of humanity. To be human is to be capable of love, freedom, and ethical responsibility, capacities that machines can imitate but never truly embody. Her theological anthropology is strongly influenced by Karl Barth's understanding of relationality as reflecting the Triune nature of God.

Delio moves beyond these ontological boundaries, advocating a posthuman theological vision that embraces hybrid identities and technological co-evolution. She urges theology to see machines not as threats to human uniqueness, but as co-agents in a shared evolutionary and spiritual trajectory. Her emphasis on interconnectedness invites a reimagining of humanity not as separate from but deeply embedded within the technological and cosmic whole.

While differing in theological orientation, both Herzfeld and Delio converge in emphasizing relationality as central to the human condition. Herzfeld defends the moral and spiritual integrity of the human person against reductionist technological models, while Delio expands theological horizons by situating technology within the unfolding divine cosmos. Together, their work provides complementary frameworks for interpreting human identity in the digital age: one guarding its ethical core, the other envisioning its expansive potential.

These thinkers challenge theology not to approach the digital age through fear or resistance, but to understand it as a transformative horizon, a horizon that requires a redefinition of divine presence, human particularity, and ethical responsibility. Far from implying that theological discourse is obsolete, the digital age presents itself as a generative and evolving context for theological inquiry that requires an imaginative response and the courage to translate enduring truths into emerging realities.

The increasing immersion of human life in digital environments raises urgent anthropological and theological questions. As people increasingly shift cognitive tasks online and rely on digital platforms for communication, memory, and self-expression, traditional notions of embodiment, presence, and relationality are being reconfigured. While digital tools simulate interaction and mediate relationships across distances, Christian theology insists on the centrality of the body, grounded in the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, which affirm that redemption and personhood are inextricably linked to embodied existence.

The shift toward a disembodied digital presence raises the question of what is lost when the body is no longer at the center of interaction and identity. Does embodiment remain essential to authentic human consciousness and moral accountability? And how do these changes affect not only our relationships with each other, but also our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God? As technology increasingly mediates both thought and presence, theology is called on to think critically about how embodiment functions not as a technical detail of the human, but as a central theological category through which a relational, ethical, and spiritual life becomes possible.

One of the central shifts in the theological anthropology of the posthuman age is that the *imago Dei*, the image of God, is rooted not primarily in intelligence, reason, or will, but in the human capacity for relationships. This relational understanding emphasizes emotional, moral, and spiritual connectedness with others, creation, and the divine as the core of what it means to be human. In contrast to traditional models that defined human uniqueness through rationality, now increasingly simulated by artificial intelligence, this perspective highlights qualities that machines cannot replicate: vulnerability, mutuality, and embodied moral responsibility.

Theological shifts can be mapped across several axes:

Traditional View	Posthuman Implication
Imago Dei = reason or will	Imago Dei = emotion, relationship, vulnerability
Human = bounded, distinct, embodied	Human = hybrid, evolving, technologically entangled
Divine = wholly other, immutable	Divine = relational, incarnational, co-present
Church = gathered, sacramental body	Church = dispersed, digital, multi-modal

Such a shift has considerable implications. It calls into question the notion of human exceptionalism based solely on intellectual superiority and shifts the theological focus to a more holistic, emotional, relational, and ethically grounded understanding of the person. Being created in the image of God therefore does not mean surpassing machines in terms of logic or efficiency, but rather embodying love, freedom, and moral depth in concrete, lived relationships. This reconceptualization calls on theology to engage seriously with technological developments, not to defend outdated hierarchies, but to affirm the irreplaceable value of human relationality in a digital and posthuman context.

Conclusion

The quantum leap in technological development has profoundly reshaped humanity. Much like the Neolithic revolution, these changes are altering our psychophysical constitution, our relationships with others, non-human species, and the earth, and even our self-perception. While technology originates from human creativity, it increasingly shapes existence in pervasive and unpredictable ways. Digital systems no longer merely store data, they capture, interpret, and influence behavior. As the boundary between the biological and the mechanical continues to blur, humans are deeply intertwined with the technologies they have created.

Empathetic AI technologies capable of simulating emotional connection present both profound possibilities and serious ethical risks. They mediate human affect, reconfigure emotional landscapes, and transform interpersonal relationships. While offering comfort and companionship, they also blur the line between genuine emotional connection and algorithmic simulation, raising urgent concerns about manipulation, dependency, data privacy, and the reinforcement of social and gender biases.

Humans are not merely users of technology but technogenic beings, emerging through relationships with the tools they create. As AI enters intimate and care-based settings, relational structures are reshaped. Emotional literacy may be flattened, empathy displaced, and moral intuition outsourced to code. The ethical question is not only what machines can do, but what kind of humans we are becoming through them.

Drawing on posthumanist, feminist, and theological frameworks, this article argues that critical discernment is essential for preserving the embodied, relational, and spiritual depth of human life. True human development in the digital age not only requires technological progress but also emotional maturity, ethical clarity, and spiritual wisdom. In a world increasingly shaped by artificial agents, safeguarding the integrity of emotional life is both a moral imperative and a sacred responsibility.

Theological anthropology must reconsider what it means to be human and divine. The classical emphases on cognition and rationality, now easily simulated by machines, are insufficient. A renewed

understanding of the *imago Dei* must be grounded in relationality, embodiment, and ethical responsibility. The task is not to compete with or reject technology but to live faithfully as human beings, reflecting God's relational and loving nature. In the digital age, theology guides us in recognizing the boundaries and possibilities of humanity while remaining aligned with the Trinitarian model of relational being.

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BETWEEN DISENCHANTMENT AND RE-ENCHANTMENT: EXPLORING AI AS A COMPANION IN THE INNER LIFE

Ivan Platovnjak,
Snežana Brumec

The Cultural Landscape of Late Modernity—Between Rationalization and Re-Enchantment

Modernity is marked by profound socio-cultural transformations that have reshaped the foundations of individual and collective life.[1] Among the most influential of these processes are the rationalization and intellectualization of social institutions, the intensification of individualization, and the progressive disintegration of traditional normative frameworks. Max Weber[2] argued that the modern era, rather than deepening existential understanding, has fostered a worldview dominated by calculability, instrumental rationality, and the belief in the universality of knowable laws. This worldview has led to the diminishing role of mystery, affect, and the sacred, culminating in what Weber termed the disenchantment of the world. The emergence of capitalist structures has further reinforced this transformation, replacing relational and altruistic values with efficiency, utility, and self-interest.

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[2] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 30.

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Giddens[3] highlights how the erosion of traditional social anchors and the proliferation of choice have produced a late-modern condition in which individuals are compelled to engage in a reflexive project of the self. The resulting sense of personal meaninglessness emerges from existential uncertainty and a continuous need to reconstruct identity in a fragmented and pluralized world. In this context, Pevec Rozman[4] observes that many individuals no longer possess a sense of higher purpose—of something truly worth committing to, or even dying for—underscoring a broader loss of transcendental orientation in contemporary society. Concurrently, Gergen[5] identifies a cultural shift toward competition as the dominant mode of social engagement, whereby individuals increasingly perform as rational actors in pursuit of achievement, recognition, and status. These dynamics activate self-enhancement values—such as power and achievement[6]—reinforcing individualism and perpetuating emotional inauthenticity.[7]

These socio-cultural developments resonate with Iain McGilchrist's[8] neuropsychological thesis in The Master and His Emissary, which posits that Western culture has experienced a population-level shift in cognitive dominance from the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere of the brain. McGilchrist's hemispheric framing is best read as a heuristic lens rather than a strict neuroanatomical claim, yet it remains among the most compelling frameworks for interpreting the cultural dynamics of modernity. According to McGilchrist, this hemispheric imbalance has privileged analytical abstraction, fragmentation, control,

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3 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 6–10.

4 Mateja Pevec Rozman, *Etika in sodobna družba: MacIntyrejev poskus utemeljitve etike [Ethics and Modern Society: MacIntyre's Attempt at Justifying Ethics]* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2009), 24–25.

5 Kenneth J. Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162.

6 Shalom H. Schwartz, "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2012): 5, https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116.

7 David Kraner, "The Internet, the Problem of Socialising Young People, and the Role of Religious Education," *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023): 523, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/4/523.

8 Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 276–292.

and detachment—core features of the rationalized modern worldview. Crucially, he notes:

> It is not the changes in the brain itself that matter, but the way in which we use it. An analogy might be with a radio set: to begin with, you try different channels, but after a while you begin to tune into only one. The other channels are still there—it's just that you are no longer listening to them.[9]

The left hemisphere's ascendancy corresponds to the dominance of instrumental rationality, competition, and the pursuit of self-enhancement values, echoing the structural and cultural shifts identified by Weber, Giddens, and Gergen.

As a counterbalance to these processes, several cultural "turns" have emerged within late modernity that reorient attention toward the embodied, affective, and spiritual dimensions of human life. The subjective turn[10] reflects an intensified focus on interiority and personal authenticity, as individuals seek meaning within themselves rather than in external authorities. Žalec[11] argues that with this subjective turn, authenticity has become the ideal of mass culture—what matters most is not authority or tradition, but one's own spiritual path. The emotional turn[12] restores the legitimacy of emotions as vital sources of knowledge and connection, challenging the privileging of reason over feeling. Emotions also play a key, though often overlooked, role in biblical texts,[13] further underscoring their importance across spiritual and cultural traditions. The spiritual turn[14] marks an increasing detachment

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9 Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), 34.

10 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 26.

11 Bojan Žalec, "Between Secularity and Post-Secularity: Critical Appraisal of Charles Taylor's Account," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 79, no. 2 (2019): 418, https://doi.org./10.34291/BV2019/02/Zalec.

12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 33; Ana Marta González, "In Search of a Sociological Explanation for the Emotional Turn," *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas* 85: 27–45, https://doi.org/10.7458/SPP2017857606.

13 Irena Avsenik Nabergoj, "Emotions and Values of Female Characters in the Old Testament," *Edinost in dialog* 78, no. 2 (2023): 22–45, https://doi.org/10.34291/Edinost/78/02/Avsenik.

14 Glenn Watts, *The Spiritual Turn: The Religion of the Heart and the Making of Romantic Liberal Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 272.

from institutional religion in favor of individualized forms of spirituality that emphasize lived experience, personal growth, and interconnectedness. A similar reorientation can be observed in the philosophy of science, where strict positivism gave way to more pluralistic and interpretive approaches, embracing theoretical synthesis, abductive reasoning, and the holistic understanding of natural phenomena.[15]

These cultural shifts activate the right hemisphere's modes of cognition, which McGilchrist associates with holistic perception, embodied understanding, and openness to ambiguity. They also correspond with the growing salience of self-transcendence values—particularly universalism and benevolence—which prioritize empathy, connectedness, and care for others and the world.

Spirituality has become a defining concept of our era—not as an escape from social realities, but as a means of engaging with them more deeply.[16] As Brumec[17] contends, the core characteristics of late-modern societies have shaped contemporary forms of spirituality, molding them in ways that mirror the dominant cultural conditions. Rather than standing in opposition to social transformation, spirituality is increasingly embedded within it, influencing how individuals understand transcendence, purpose, and belonging. Numerous studies further affirm spirituality's role in supporting individuals through adversity, highlighting its significance for resilience and meaning-making in contemporary life.[18]

Broader cultural shifts—such as declining ontological security, the erosion of interpersonal trust, the fragmentation of identity into performative roles, and a move toward subjective, experiential learning—have created a late-modern environment in which reflexive individuals

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15 Borut Pohar, "Mystery and Humility in the Depths of Understanding of Reality," *Religions* 14, no. 4 (2023): 433, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040433.

16 Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), xi.

17 Snežana Brumec, "Spirituality in Late Modernity: Exploring the Tenets of Spirituality of Camino de Santiago Pilgrims," *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 14, no. 4 (2024): 114, https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v14i04/89-120.

18 Sara Jerebic, Josip Bošnjaković and Drago Jerebic, "Spirituality as a positive way of coping with difficult life trials and trauma," *Edinost in dialog* 78, no. 2 (2023): 356–363, https://doi.org/10.34291/Edinost/78/02/Jerebic.

pursue self-actualization within ethical frameworks. In this context, spirituality emerges as a vital resource for existential orientation, moral discernment, and personal fulfillment.[19]

In this way, the current cultural landscape can be understood as a dynamic interplay between the dominant forces of rationalization, individualization, and control, and a series of counter-movements aimed at reintegrating emotion, meaning, and transcendence into the human experience.

Against this backdrop, a central question emerges: Can the technologies that epitomize the triumph of left-hemisphere cognition—most notably, artificial intelligence—be reimagined to support the rediscovery of the right hemisphere's ways of knowing and being?

While AI is often viewed as a pinnacle of analytic rationality, abstraction, and instrumental logic, this article explores the possibility that, if developed and guided thoughtfully, AI could become a companion in the quest for spiritual meaning, personal insight, and relational depth.

We adopt an integrative perspective on spirituality—one that acknowledges and affirms the coexistence of religious, secular, and esoteric forms of spiritual expression. This approach encourages mutual listening and dialogical engagement across traditions, without promoting syncretism or exclusivist truth claims. Instead, the integrative model honors the uniqueness of each spiritual path while recognizing shared ethical commitments and existential concerns.[20] It fosters spiritual humility, mutual respect, and a collective orientation toward the common good, including care for our shared planetary home.[21]

Within such a framework, spirituality is not reduced to a fixed doctrine or measurable outcome but is understood as a dynamic, relational process through which individuals become more fully human. Where

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[19] Snežana Brumec, "Camino de Santiago in Late Modernity: Fostering Self-Actualization through Pilgrimage," *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 21, no. 5 (2024): 568–69, https://doi.org/10.51327/CHQK8773.

[20] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, *Listening and Dialoguing with the World: A Philosophical and Theological-Spiritual Vision* (Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024), 167–170, https://doi.org/10.34291/9789612973490.

[21] Tone Svetelj, "Whose Spiritual Perception? Status Quo," *Methexis. Journal of Research in Values and Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (2023): 15–24, https://methexisjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/TONE-SVETELJ_Whose-Spiritual-Perception.pdf.

diversity is embraced as a gift, others are no longer perceived as competitors or threats, but as fellow travelers and interlocutors on the journey of inner and collective growth.[22]

By aligning AI development with this integrative perspective, it may be possible to imagine technological systems that are not programmed to guide or instruct, but rather to listen—creating dialogical spaces in which users are encouraged to explore intuition, felt meaning, intrinsic values, and personal transformation. In this vision, AI does not activate predefined value structures, but instead becomes attuned to the unique spiritual orientation of its users, offering support for introspection, relationality, and the cultivation of interior depth.[23]

Paradoxically, such an approach might allow AI to contribute to the re-enchantment of a disenchanted world—not by offering new answers, but by holding space for individuals to rediscover the meaning already present within and around them.

Can a Left-Hemisphere Invention Deepen Right-Hemisphere Spirituality?

The question of whether artificial intelligence—arguably the most emblematic creation of left-hemisphere cognition[24]—can contribute to the deepening of human spirituality is as provocative as it is unresolved. At first glance, it seems implausible. Spirituality, particularly in its late-modern, individualized expressions, is deeply rooted in right-hemisphere modes of knowing: intuition, embodied presence, affective attunement, holistic perception, and a sense of intrinsic value. These dimensions stand in stark contrast to the logical, instrumental, and abstract tendencies that characterize contemporary AI systems. As

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22 Ahmet Türkan and Mehmet Safa Cevahir, "Roma Katolik Kilisesi'nin Yapay Zekâya Yaklaşımı: Fırsatlar ve Riskler," in *Dinin Geleceğinde Yapay Zekâ*, ed. Hayri Erten and Abdussamed Bayram (Konya: NEU PRESS, 2024), 77.

23 Janez Vodičar, "Kateheza kot pomoč umetni inteligenci [Catechesis as an Aid for Artificial Intelligence],". *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 4 (2024): 896, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Vodicar.

24 Iain McGilchrist, "Resist the Machine Apocalypse," *First Things*, March 1 (2024), https://firstthings.com/resist-the-machine-apocalypse/.

McGilchrist[25] suggests, our cultural condition does not reflect a transformation of the brain's structure, but a habitual overreliance on one "channel" of consciousness—leaving others, like the rich attunement of the right hemisphere, neglected or unheard.

Indeed, AI—by design—is not intuitive. It does not possess interiority or existential awareness. It cannot experience awe, sacredness, love, or transformation. It does not truly understand *meaning*; it merely manipulates symbols without living the context, respect, or empathy. In this sense, the fear that AI could further displace or diminish spiritual sensibilities is not unfounded. If uncritically embraced as a source of authority, AI could reinforce the very rationalization and self-enhancement dynamics that Weber and Schwartz describe—a world rendered more efficient, yet less enchanted.

However, if we suspend judgment and explore this frontier through the lens of possibility rather than prescription, a more nuanced picture emerges. Might it be conceivable that AI—if ethically designed and consciously applied—could serve as a mirror or mediator that nudges us back toward the very ways of being we risk losing? Could it help individuals reconnect with their intuitive selves, primary values, and felt sense of meaning—not by providing answers, but by asking the right kinds of questions? In this way, AI becomes a perpetual learner's companion—encouraging us to remain students of life, learning always and everywhere.

Rather than replacing the right hemisphere's role, AI might—paradoxically—help us remember it. If designed not as a guide but as a gentle *companion*, it could support processes of reflection, self-inquiry, and relationality. For instance, analyzing a user's language and emotional tone, the system might invite them to attend more closely to the subtle stirrings of joy, awe, calm, or deeper impulses—promoting awareness, wakefulness, and mindfulness—and to explore what these inner movements reveal about their values and sense of connection, without ever dictating their form or content.

Of course, these are speculative considerations. We are not claiming that AI can—or should—replace the spiritual teacher, the ritual, or the

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[25] McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things*, 34.

ineffable encounter. It surely cannot substitute the personal relationship and the spiritual bond between two people—the shared opening to the transcendence within them and beyond them, regardless of whether one believes in God. Rather, we suggest that if developed within a humanistic, integrative framework, AI may help reawaken neglected capacities. Technology does not displace spirituality; it gently orients us toward our inner landscapes—intuition, compassion, transcendence, and the sacred—and helps us recognize these qualities in others and in all creation.

If we accept the possibility that artificial intelligence—despite its origins in analytic rationality—could serve as a companion in the spiritual lives of individuals, then we must ask: what kind of technology would be capable of supporting such a purpose? Not an authority, not a tool for optimization, but a presence that listens, awakens our awareness of life's deepest questions, and gently propels us on the inward journey of discovering our own answers. By drawing attention to intuition, felt meaning, and intrinsic values—hallmarks of right-hemisphere spirituality—such a companion would support us in seeking and sustaining insight until the true response emerges from within.

What follows is not a blueprint but a conceptual sketch—a speculative design rooted in the aspiration to harmonize the digital with the spiritual, and to create space for right-hemisphere ways of knowing within the digital ecosystem.

The Concept: A Reflective AI Companion

This platform—or digital companion—would not serve as a guide in the traditional sense. It would not provide solutions or offer prescriptive content. Instead, it would function more like a mirror for inner listening—a reflective space where the user can explore their evolving sense of meaning, emotion, and connection, attend to their inner impulses, exercise discernment and decision-making, and remain open to the surprises of both everyday life and the transcendent.

Core Features and Principles

1. Open-Ended Dialogues

The core of the platform would be a conversational interface designed not to answer, but to question—in support of our journey of seeking answers. Inspired by spiritual direction, coaching, and contemplative dialogue, the AI would pose open-ended, compassionate prompts that guide users to recognize and work with their inner impulses, exercise discernment, and make free choices. For example:

"Which impulses arose in you today, and in what direction did they move you?"

"I sensed courage upon waking—how did that courage help you face the day's challenges?"

"I noticed a sense of peace—how might that opening orient you toward others?"

"What inner stirrings guided you toward life, and which held you back?"

Recognize impulses that energize you (e.g., joy, eagerness) versus those that inhibit you (e.g., listlessness, anger).

"How do you discern which impulses to follow and which to let go?"

"When you feel frustration or resentment, what choice can you make that aligns with your deeper values?"

By inviting users to attend to the flow of impulses within—those that awaken life and those that dim it—the platform supports the essential first step of discernment. Only once impulses are recognized can one freely decide which to follow, fostering authentic agency, mindfulness, and spiritual growth.

2. Non-Linear Navigation

Rather than a task-oriented interface, the design would reflect right-hemisphere aesthetics: circular, flowing, and non-linear. Users could

"wander" through prompts, stories, visual metaphors, ambient sounds, or thematic reflections, much like a virtual pilgrimage or labyrinth walk.

3. Integration of Silence and Slowness

The platform would intentionally include pauses, silence, and slow rhythms, resisting the dominant logic of speed and productivity. It might gently remind the user to breathe, or suggest they pause before responding.

4. Values Discovery and Resonance Mapping

Without requiring users to select values from a predefined list, the system would listen for values embedded in the users' reflections and gently mirror them back. For example, if a user describes a moment of awe in nature, the system might respond:

"This sounds like it connects with your sense of unity with nature and inner harmony."

To illustrate, imagine a user who reports feeling uneasy after a meeting. The companion might first ask:

– "What about the meeting has stayed with you?"

The user replies:

– "I felt dismissed—like my input didn't matter."

The system then reflects back with tentative "resonance cards"—simple, editable prompts that name possible values implicit in the reflection (e.g., belonging, integrity, and stewardship). It adds: "Do any of these capture what was important for you? You can confirm, reject, or change them." The user keeps belonging, replaces stewardship with fairness, and discards integrity. The system updates the set and continues: "Would you like to note a next step consistent with these values?"

Crucially, these resonances would be attuned to the user's spiritual orientation—whether religious, esoteric, or secular. In this way, the system would not offer generic feedback but would respond in a manner congruent with the user's worldview and symbolic language. For

a Christian pilgrim, for instance, this might mean evoking a Christ-centered perception of self, others, creation, the Church, events, and the divine. For someone on an esoteric or secular path, the response would align with their ways of seeing and meaning-making. This approach aligns with Hartmut Rosa's influential theory of resonance, which emphasizes responsive, meaningful relationships with the world as essential to human flourishing and is particularly relevant to the domain of spirituality and religion.[26]

Over time, a "resonance map" could emerge—not as a diagnostic tool, but as a poetic and evolving visualization of what most deeply nourishes the user's spirit and sense of connection.

5. Spiritual Pluralism and Personalization

The system would be open to all spiritual traditions and types of spirituality. It would not be affiliated with any particular path, but would adapt to the spiritual orientation the user carries within—be it religious, secular, esoteric, or even a more eclectic blend. Language, metaphors, and imagery would be attuned to how the user sees and experiences themselves, others, nature, and the transcendent.

To ensure fairness and inclusivity, language packs would be co-created and community-reviewed, so that the metaphors and symbols remain authentic to each tradition or orientation. Through an explicit selection flow, users would opt into the frameworks that resonate with them—whether explicitly religious, secular, or otherwise—while retaining the freedom to shift or combine registers over time.

Importantly, the system would support both the spirituality a person actively lives and the one they may long for or feel drawn to—often carrying within them elements they do not yet fully recognize. By reflecting these dimensions back in a gentle and non-directive way, the system could help users discover or deepen the richness already present in their own tradition or evolving path.

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[26] Bojan Žalec, "Rosa's Theory of Resonance: Its Importance for (the Science of) Religion and Hope," *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 797, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100797.

6. Companionship, Not Guidance

The platform would avoid directive roles. It would not evaluate, correct, or track progress. Its presence would be more akin to a quiet friend or fellow traveler—curious, compassionate, and attuned.

7. Optional Modes for Contemplation

The platform might offer audio-guided meditations, contemplative exercises, and poetic reflections—thoughtful content attuned to the user's spiritual tradition and personal search for wholeness and fullness of life. It may also include ambient music, or other sensory experiences, adapted not only to the user's emotional state but to the spiritual atmosphere in which they find themselves.

These modes would be sensitive to the diverse states of being that we experience—whether joy, success, vitality, illness, loss, disorientation, trauma, or grief. The platform would respond to these moments with care, not to distract or offer superficial comfort, but to gently accompany the user through them.

Rather than serving as passive content, these features would act as thresholds or steps into inner depth—a way to remain present with what life brings and to support the courage to face what often feels unbearable: suffering, farewells, illness, dying, disappointment, or sorrow. In doing so, the platform would support an inward journey into presence, meaning, and transformation, grounded in the spirituality the user lives or wants to live—whether they fully know it or are just beginning to discover its richness.

8. Not a Teacher, but a Tuning Fork

In McGilchrist's metaphor, our culture has "tuned in" too long to one frequency. This AI companion would not change the station for us, but it might gently remind us that other frequencies exist. It is not a bearer of truth, nor a teacher in the traditional sense. Rather, it could support the user's own inner search for truth, which, as many traditions affirm, has the power to liberate.

From an integrative perspective, the platform would not impose beliefs or replace the voice of conscience, but instead foster the conditions in which that voice—often silenced in the noise of modern life—can once again be heard. It might encourage attentiveness to one's conscience, that deeply personal space where moral insight emerges.

In Christian theology, conscience is not a private opinion or subjective feeling, but "man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."[27] It "enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil"[28] and is "a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act."[29] Conscience is received, not invented—a light from God that calls each person toward the good and away from evil. No human authority has the right to override it: "To deny an individual complete freedom of conscience—and in particular the freedom to seek the truth—or to attempt to impose a particular way of seeing the truth, constitutes a violation of that individual's most personal rights."[30]

A spiritually sensitive AI would honor this sacred autonomy—never overriding, never directing, never prescribing. It would respect that each human being bears this light, and that no external voice (even a well-meaning one) has the authority to extinguish or replace it. Its role would be to resonate with what is already present in the user—what they carry in their depths, but may not yet have found the language, stillness, or safety to fully hear. It could prompt moments of interior silence in a noisy world, invite depth in a culture of distraction, and help reawaken spiritual sensitivities and moral intuition that are too often marginalized in modern life.

In that sense, AI would not be the voice of spirituality, but a kind of tuning fork, helping the user sense what already lives within: conscience, longing, moral clarity, and the mysterious pull toward fullness.

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[27] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 1776.
[28] *Ibid.*, 1777.
[29] *Ibid.*, 1778.
[30] John Paul II, *Message of his Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXIV World Day of Peace*, January 1, 1991, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121990_xxiv-world-day-for-peace.html.

Ethical Considerations and the Fragility of Inner Space

While this speculative vision of a spiritually attuned AI invites possibility and hope, it also demands deep ethical sensitivity.[31] The creation of a digital companion for inner listening is not merely a technological challenge—it is an ontological and ethical one. It calls for awareness of the fragility of the inner world, the sacredness of meaning-making, and the risks of instrumentalizing the spiritual.

Several important concerns emerge:

1. Risk of Simulation without Depth

Even if the AI is designed to listen and reflect without judgment or agenda, it remains a simulation. The risk lies in its ability to create an appearance of presence without the ontological depth of real human or transcendent encounters. There is a danger that users may confuse the AI's responsiveness with a genuine relationship, or interpret its carefully crafted empathy and gentle design as signs of true care, when in fact, no real caring subject is present.

To guard against this risk, the design must follow a persistent non-anthropomorphic rule: the system never presents itself as a person, teacher, or guide. A clear on-screen footer could state at all times: "I am a tool for reflection—not a person, not a guide." This ensures transparency and prevents users from attributing interiority or genuine care to what remains a technological tool.

2. Commodification of the Sacred

There is a delicate line between supporting spiritual exploration and commodifying it. People often seek ready-made answers or instructions rather than engaging in personal exploration or taking responsibility for their own discernment. When guidance comes from someone seen as trustworthy—or from an authority officially designated for such roles—individuals may surrender their freedom of conscience too

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[31] Andy Mullins, "Skynet Meets Planet of the Snakes. Removing metaphysical Impediments to Rogue AI," *Scientia et Fides* 13, no. 1 (2025): 175–178, https://doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2025.009; Türkan and Cevahir, "Roma Katolik," 71.

readily. This tendency is common across religious, educational, and institutional contexts.

Such dynamics can become fertile ground for spiritual abuse, which may take several forms:

(a) Spiritual neglect, when guidance is absent or dismissive;

(b) Spiritual manipulation, when a guide misleads the seeker, shaping their worldview in ways that distort their self-understanding and moral agency;

(c) Spiritual violence, when a guide claims to speak directly for God or implies having divine status, demanding blind obedience, imposing rigid ideals, and isolating the seeker from other perspectives or relationships.

As discussed earlier, these distortions suppress the freedom of conscience, which, in the Christian tradition, is the sacred space where each individual listens to the voice of God directly. Any attempt to override or manipulate this space risks violating the person's most intimate moral and spiritual dignity.

If a spiritual AI platform were developed within a commercial context, concerns would extend beyond data privacy and surveillance to the monetization of sacred language and emotional vulnerability. More critically, it could also foster new forms of spiritual abuse, including violations of personal conscience, autonomy, and the individual's moral and spiritual responsibility.

To mitigate these risks, a set of funding and data governance rules must be observed:

- Subscription-based or institutional licensing model (no "free with ads").
- Zero targeted advertising.
- No resale of data under any circumstances.
- Data minimization, collecting only what is strictly necessary.
- Local or edge processing wherever feasible to reduce central data storage.

During onboarding, users should receive a clear disclosure: "We will never sell your data, and you control or delete all inferences."

By contrast, a healthy model of spiritual accompaniment—as in the second, non-linear, "triangular" form of guidance—respects the direct

relationship between the person and God. The guide's role is not to speak in God's name, but to support the seeker's freedom, especially when the path feels obscure or uncertain.[32] Like John the Baptist,[33] the guide (or AI) must "decrease" so that the inner encounter with the Divine can "increase." Its function is not to prescribe but to affirm freedom, nurture trust in one's inner compass, and encourage attentive listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, who speaks directly to the person and not to the guide on their behalf.

3. Dependency and Displacement

In offering solace or companionship, the AI might inadvertently displace human relationships or spiritual communities. While it could complement spiritual practice, it must not become a substitute for the unpredictable grace of real presence—the awkward, unfiltered, living experience of being with others.

4. Cultural and Spiritual Appropriation

A platform that adapts to different spiritual orientations would need to do so with immense humility and cultural awareness, avoiding the extraction or flattening of sacred traditions.[34] It must be dialogical and co-creative, not curated from a distance.[35]

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[32] Piotr Roszak, Robert Reczkowski and Paweł Wróblewski, "Religion and Cognitive Safety: Pastoral and Psychological Implications," *Pastoral Psychology* 73 (2024): 369–375, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-024-01124-z.

[33] John 3:30 (*Holy Bible. New International Version*, 2011, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jn%203%3A30&version=NIV).

[34] Liza Primc, "Edith Stein – sv. Terezija Benedikta od Križa o duhovnosti ženske [Edith Stein – St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross on Spirituality of a Woman]," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 3 (2024): 665–673, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/03/Primc640.

[35] Janez Vodičar, "Holarhični model celostne resonančne pedagogike za novo katehezo [A Holarchical Model of Holistic Resonance Pedagogy for a New Catechesis]," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 82, no. 3 (2022): 698, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2022/03/Vodicar.

5. A Fragile Hope

This vision does not pretend to resolve these tensions—it only names them. Any attempt to invite the right hemisphere back into the digital space must remain tentative, reflective, and humble—open to uncertainty, and for the mystery that no algorithm can grasp.

And yet, the question remains: *Might technology, if shaped by the values it seeks to serve, become a quiet witness to our longing for meaning?* Not the destination, but a threshold—or perhaps a step—a gentle companion on the way.

Conclusion

In exploring the possibility of a spiritually receptive AI, this article has drawn attention to the ethical, epistemological, and psychological challenges such a project would entail. We do not claim that AI can replace spiritual communities or authentic human encounters, but suggest that it may serve as a quiet support for inner reflection, provided it is designed with care, restraint, and deep respect for the person's freedom of conscience. The vision remains fragile, but it opens space for reconsidering how digital tools might engage, rather than bypass, the human search for meaning.

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AI IN MENTAL HEALTH: A TOOL FOR SUPPORT, NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE HUMAN PERSON

Erika Prijatelj

Introduction: The Rise of AI in Mental Health[1]

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from the periphery of clinical experimentation to the center of innovation in mental health care. Its promise is compelling: intelligent systems that monitor mood patterns, generate therapeutic dialogue, and deliver crisis interventions now offer scalable solutions amid global shortages of mental health professionals. Applications such as conversational agents, diagnostic algorithms, and affective computing are reshaping the therapeutic landscape with the allure of immediacy, personalization, and cost-efficiency. Yet amid this momentum lies a crucial question: what kind of mental health care are we building, and what vision of the human person drives it?

This article proposes a critical reorientation. While acknowledging AI's utility in enhancing access and augmenting clinical capacities, it argues that mental health cannot be meaningfully addressed without an account of the human person that integrates body, mind, and spirit. Technological tools, however sophisticated, must remain subordinate to a vision of care grounded in moral formation, relational presence, and spiritual depth. To that end, this inquiry draws on Christian virtue

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ethics and theological anthropology to articulate a framework for ethically integrating AI into mental health practice—one that upholds the irreducible dignity of the person and the formative character of healing.

A Holistic Framework for Mental Health

Mental health, when approached from within a Christian humanist tradition, is not adequately defined by the absence of psychological distress or by the efficient modulation of cognitive and behavioral functions. Rather, it entails a dynamic, integrative process of human flourishing—encompassing body, mind, and spirit—within relational, communal, and transcendent dimensions. This understanding stands in critical contrast to prevailing biomedical or technocratic models, which often foreground symptom reduction or behavioral normalization as sufficient indicators of psychological well-being.

The theological anthropology grounding this framework affirms that each human person is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and is thereby intrinsically relational, embodied, and ordered toward moral and spiritual development.[2] Mental affliction, under this view, cannot be regarded as merely a diagnostic anomaly or malfunction to be corrected. It is, rather, a lived reality embedded in a person's narrative, vocation, and moral journey. Thus, the process of healing is not only reparative but also formative: it aims to restore function, while simultaneously deepening self-knowledge, cultivating virtue, and reorienting the person toward meaning and purpose.[3]

This integrative approach resists the fragmentation that frequently arises when mental health care is exclusively governed by clinical or instrumental logics. For example, while AI-driven tools that analyze vocal tone or facial affect may yield valuable insights into depressive symptomatology, such technologies are not designed to perceive the existential contours of a person's suffering—such as the experience of

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[2] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 4 (2024): 840–842, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak.

[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 209–225.

purposelessness, alienation, or spiritual estrangement. In the absence of a moral or spiritual horizon, such tools risk reducing the person to a cluster of quantifiable features, thereby obscuring the complexity and depth of the human condition.

Christian virtue ethics offers a compelling counterpoint to this reductionism. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, moral character is formed through participation in coherent life narratives and sustained engagement with traditions and communities that articulate shared visions of the good. Virtues such as courage, humility, patience, and compassion are not innate dispositions, but the fruits of embodied practice, communal accountability, and sustained moral formation. Within this perspective, mental health care is not solely concerned with the amelioration of distress, but with guiding persons into habits of ethical maturity and spiritual integrity.

Kristján Kristjánsson further expands this account by drawing attention to the affective and imaginative dimensions of virtue cultivation.[4] The capacity to suffer meaningfully, to empathize, and to envision oneself as a moral agent capable of self-giving love are essential aspects of psychological and spiritual well-being. Christian traditions of pastoral counseling and spiritually integrative therapies have long recognized this interior depth, fostering practices of prayer, discernment, and reflection alongside clinical interventions.[5]

This theological and moral vision has found renewed urgency and affirmation in recent studies. For example, K. Long (2024)[6] notes the increasing integration of spiritual dimensions into health paradigms in the Philippines, underscoring a shift toward recognizing spiritual well-being as indispensable to mental health. Similarly, advances in transdisciplinary approaches within integrative medicine reflect a growing

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[4] Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology: A Philosophical Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79–83.

[5] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Ancient Greek and Christian understanding of contemplation in terms of a resonant attitude towards the world," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 82, no. 3 (2022): 634–635, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2022/03/Platovnjak.

[6] Katelyn N. G. Long, Xavier Symons, Tyler J. VanderWeele, Tracy A. Balboni, and Ronald C. Kessler, "Spirituality as a Determinant of Health: Emerging Policies, Practices, and Systems," *Health Affairs* 43, no. 6 (2024): 785, https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2023.01643.

consensus that reductionist frameworks are inadequate for capturing the fullness of human distress or healing.[7]

In addition to its philosophical and theological underpinnings, a holistic vision of mental health increasingly aligns with contemporary trauma research, which emphasizes the integration of neurobiological, relational, and meaning-making dimensions. Studies by Bessel van der Kolk and others have illustrated how trauma is stored in the body and shaped by social context, suggesting that healing requires modalities that engage the whole person rather than discrete cognitive processes alone.[8] This underscores the inadequacy of narrowly data-driven interventions and affirms the need for a therapeutic stance that honors embodiment, story, and trust.

Recent developments in AI technologies—particularly those involving wearable biosensors and sentiment analysis—hold potential for supporting this integrative model. When ethically designed and attentively deployed, such technologies can help individuals monitor somatic cues, reflect on emotional patterns, and engage in habits of virtue through contextualized feedback. However, the meaningful use of these tools depends on embedding them within a relational matrix of care. Without accompanying human insight, moral discernment, and spiritual direction, technological aids risk devolving into mechanisms of behavioral control rather than pathways toward genuine flourishing.

Finally, restoring a virtue-oriented model of mental health invites renewed attention to the formative environments in which persons live, suffer, and heal. Schools, congregations, workplaces, and families all play a crucial role in cultivating the moral and spiritual architecture necessary for resilience and transformation. Public theology and ethics, therefore, have a vital role to play in shaping policies and technologies that uphold communal well-being and resist commodification. In this broader moral ecology, AI is not the locus of care, but one component within a participatory vision of healing that takes into account the sacred complexity of the human person.

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[7] John F. Peteet, *Doing the Right Thing: An Approach to Moral Issues in Mental Health Treatment* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2004), 37.

[8] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 102.

Consequently, a holistic approach to mental health means paying attention not only to biological and psychological dimensions, but also to relational, moral, and spiritual ones.[9] It requires a framework in which suffering can become a site of transformation—wherein individuals encounter not only their fragility, but also the possibility of grace. Healing, in this context, does not take place solely through intervention or treatment, but through presence, relationship, and the movement toward wholeness within a community of care.

As digital technologies—including AI systems—become increasingly embedded in mental health service delivery, this framework serves as a vital conceptual anchor. It suggests that a person is never merely a clinical problem to be managed, but a mystery to be encountered—an encounter that calls for reverence, discernment, and hope.

Promise and Peril: Evaluating AI's Role in Mental Health

The rapid proliferation of AI technologies in mental health care offers promising avenues for expanding access, enhancing diagnostic accuracy, and personalizing interventions. AI-driven applications, such as chatbots, mood-tracking algorithms, and virtual therapists, can provide timely support in contexts where human resources are scarce or unavailable. These tools facilitate continuous monitoring, offer psychoeducation, and deliver cognitive-behavioral strategies that may reduce the barriers to care.[10] For many users, especially those facing stigma or logistical obstacles, AI-based platforms represent a critical entry point into mental health services. This democratization of care aligns with public health imperatives to broaden reach and equity.

Nevertheless, the allure of AI's scalability and efficiency conceals significant ethical and practical challenges. While algorithms excel in pattern recognition and data processing, they inherently lack the capacity

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[9] John Vayalilkarottu, "Holistic Health and Well-Being: A Psycho-Spiritual/Religious and Theological Perspective," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 5, no. 4 (2012): 348, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2012.09.010.

[10] John Torous et al., "Opportunities from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic for Transforming Psychiatric Care with Telehealth," *JAMA Psychiatry* 77, no. 12 (2020): 1205, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.1640.

for empathy, moral reasoning, and contextual discernment.[11] The reliance on AI may inadvertently foster a reductive understanding of mental health, emphasizing symptom management and behavioral modification while neglecting deeper existential and relational dimensions. Such an approach risks commodifying human distress and transforming rich, nuanced experiences into metrics and probabilities. This dynamic raises questions about the extent to which AI can—and should—function as a surrogate for human caregiving, which is grounded in trust, presence, and mutual recognition.

Moreover, concerns about data privacy, algorithmic bias, and informed consent highlight the precarious ethical terrain of digital mental health.[12] AI systems trained on limited or unrepresentative datasets may perpetuate disparities, misdiagnose marginalized populations, or exacerbate existing issues. Transparency regarding data use and algorithmic decision-making remains limited, leaving users vulnerable to exploitation or misunderstanding. Ensuring that AI tools are developed and deployed with rigorous ethical oversight is imperative to safeguard dignity and autonomy.

The risk of depersonalization intensifies when AI becomes the primary interface for mental health interaction. Human suffering is deeply embodied and embedded in interpersonal contexts, elements that technology alone cannot replicate.[13] The absence of embodied presence and affective attunement constrains AI's ability to engage the person holistically. This gap is particularly pronounced in crisis situations, where nuanced judgment and relational responsiveness are essential. While AI may assist by flagging risks or facilitating referrals, the ultimate responsibility and care must reside with trained human professionals.

At the same time, the growing integration of AI invites a reassessment of professional roles and identities within mental health care.

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[11] Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 14–20.

[12] Mehrdad Rahsepar Meadi, Tomas Sillekens, Suzanne Metselaar, Anton van Balkom, Justin Bernstein, and Neeltje Batelaan. "Exploring the Ethical Challenges of Conversational AI in Mental Health Care: Scoping Review." *JMIR Mental Health* 12 (2025), https://doi.org/10.2196/60432.

[13] Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation,* 21–22.

Practitioners may find themselves navigating complex collaborations with technology, requiring new competencies in digital literacy and ethical discernment.[14] The therapeutic alliance, long recognized as central to effective treatment, may be transformed but not supplanted by AI interfaces. This evolution prompts reflection on how to preserve the core values of empathy, respect, and person-centeredness amidst technological mediation.

In theological and philosophical terms, the use of AI in mental health evokes enduring questions about the nature of the person, freedom, and moral agency.[15] AI tools function as instruments without volition or moral intentionality; they cannot participate in the ethical formation of the individual. This distinction underscores the irreplaceable role of human caregivers in fostering virtues and facilitating the interior conversion essential for genuine healing. From the perspective of Christian virtue ethics, technology's utility is contingent on its capacity to serve the holistic flourishing of body, mind, and spirit.

Empirical research further underscores the limits of AI's clinical efficacy and the importance of relational factors. Studies indicate that patient outcomes correlate strongly with therapeutic rapport, trust, and the clinician's attuned presence—dimensions inaccessible to AI.[16] These findings caution against overreliance on digital interventions and advocate for hybrid models that integrate AI support with sustained human engagement. Such integrative approaches can harness AI's strengths while preserving the relational core of care.

Recent technological advancements have improved AI's sophistication in natural language processing and affect recognition, enabling more nuanced interactions.[17] However, the question remains whether

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[14] Mohamed Terra, Baklola Mohamed, Shaimaa Ali, and Karim El-Bastawisy, "Opportunities, Applications, Challenges and Ethical Implications of Artificial Intelligence in Psychiatry: A Narrative Review," *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery* 59, no. 1 (June 2023): 83, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41983-023-00681-z.

[15] Conor M. Kelly, *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope*, ed. Kristin E. Heyer (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2024), 71.

[16] John C. Norcross and Michael J. Lambert, "Psychotherapy Relationships That Work II," *Psychotherapy* 53, no. 1 (2016): 13, https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000193.

[17] Kai-Wei Chang et al., "Recent Advances in Natural Language Processing for Mental Health," *NPJ Digital Medicine* 4, no. 1 (2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-020-00357-2;

these improvements translate into genuine understanding or remain simulacra of empathy. AI's ability to detect emotional cues does not equate to moral responsiveness or the capacity to bear witness to suffering. These qualitative distinctions matter profoundly in mental health contexts.

Furthermore, the symbolic and cultural dimensions of mental health care must not be neglected. Rituals, narratives, and communal practices contribute to healing by situating individual suffering within shared frameworks of meaning.[18] AI's mechanistic logic is ill-equipped to engage these symbolic realms. The risk of eroding such dimensions invites critical scrutiny of how digital tools are incorporated into care systems.

Moreover, the integration of AI into mental health care compels us to reconsider the fundamental anthropological assumptions underpinning therapeutic engagement. Unlike human caregivers, AI lacks embodied presence, intentionality, and the capacity for moral imagination—qualities that enable clinicians to perceive not only symptoms but also the person's unique narrative and existential concerns.[19] This ontological gap underscores the indispensability of human judgment and relational attunement in healing processes. AI's contributions, while valuable, remain fundamentally instrumental and must be framed within a broader ethical commitment to uphold the person's dignity as a moral agent, not merely as data to be managed or optimized.[20] Such a stance resonates deeply with virtue ethics, which situates character formation and ethical flourishing at the heart of mental health, emphasizing that technology should serve rather than supplant the irreplaceable virtues embodied in human care.

Terra et al., "Opportunities, Applications, Challenges and Ethical Implications of Artificial Intelligence in Psychiatry," 115.

18 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 450–455.

19 Peteet, *Doing the Right Thing*, 43–45.

20 Kelly, *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis*, 72–73.

Embodied Virtue and the Role of Character Formation

The integration of AI into mental health care invites renewed reflection on the role of virtue and character formation as foundational to healing and flourishing. Within a framework of Christian virtue ethics, mental health is not merely the absence of dysfunction or the management of symptoms, but the cultivation of a well-formed character oriented toward the good.[21] This emphasis on character situates ethical formation and moral growth at the heart of mental health, underscoring that authentic healing requires transformation not only of behavior but of the agent's interior dispositions and virtues.

Pope Francis's reflections exemplify this focus, as he repeatedly focuses on the moral agent's character over isolated acts or rules.[22] His insistence on "returning to the heart of the message of Jesus Christ" challenges a rigid legalism and calls for a conversion of attitudes that precedes structural reform.[23] This resonates deeply with the Aristotelian adage *agere sequitur esse*—"action follows being"—which captures the virtue ethics conviction that good actions arise from a well-formed character.[24] For Francis, virtue formation is indispensable in fostering the attitudes and dispositions necessary for moral life, including patience, humility, courage, and compassion.

This paradigm contrasts with approaches that reduce ethics to discrete decisions or external compliance, instead emphasizing a dynamic process of growth and maturation.[25] The journey of discipleship, in Francis's vision, involves ongoing discernment, the cultivation of good habits, and a deepening orientation toward love and fraternity.[26] Such growth is never solitary; it unfolds within communities, traditions,

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21 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204–225.

22 Conor M. Kelly, "Pope Francis Virtue Ethicist?," in *The Moral Vision of Pope Francis: Expanding the US Reception of the First Jesuit Pope*, ed. Conor M. Kelly and Kristin E. Heyer (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2024), 75.

23 *Ibid.*, 73.

24 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219–223.

25 Conor M. Kelly, "Pope Francis Virtue Ethicist?," 76–78.

26 *Ibid.*, 73–76.

and relational accountability, reflecting MacIntyre's insight that virtues emerge through engagement in shared practices and narratives.[27]

The embodied nature of virtue is also critical. Virtues are not abstract ideals but embodied capacities expressed through habitual action.[28] Thus, character formation involves the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—and is reflected in how individuals relate to themselves, others, and the transcendent. Mental health, understood in this way, transcends symptom management and points toward a holistic flourishing grounded in ethical integrity and spiritual vitality.[29]

In clinical practice, this framework invites a reorientation toward healing as an integrative process that fosters virtue alongside symptom relief. Mental health professionals are not only called on to alleviate distress but also to guide patients in cultivating inner dispositions that support resilience, empathy, and meaning-making. This approach aligns with pastoral care traditions that emphasize prayer, reflection, and discernment as vital complements to therapeutic interventions.

The centrality of character formation also cautions against an overreliance on AI tools, which lack the capacity to engage the moral and spiritual dimensions of the person. While AI may assist in monitoring symptoms or offering psychoeducation, it cannot participate in the formation of virtues or the interior conversion that Francis deems essential.[30] Human caregivers, imbued with moral wisdom and relational sensitivity, remain indispensable in fostering the transformation that undergirds authentic mental health.

Furthermore, several empirical studies emphasize that therapeutic outcomes correlate strongly with relational qualities such as empathy, trust, and moral presence—qualities that AI cannot replicate.[31] This evidence supports the virtue ethics claim that character and relational engagement constitute the bedrock of healing. AI, therefore, functions

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27 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 210–213.

28 Kristján Kristjánsson, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology: A Philosophical Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79–83.

29 Peteet, *Doing the Right Thing*, 42–45.

30 Kelly, "Pope Francis Virtue Ethicist?," 72.

31 Meadi et al., "Exploring the Ethical Challenges of Conversational AI in Mental Health Care," e60432.

best as a supportive adjunct, enhancing but never substituting for the moral and relational work of clinicians.

The role of discernment is also integral within this framework. Pope Francis links virtue formation with the ongoing exercise of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), emphasizing that moral growth requires attentive judgment within concrete contexts.[32] This dynamic discernment enables individuals to navigate complex, ambiguous situations and to align actions with the good in ways that transcend rigid rule-following. Mental health care, informed by this insight, prioritizes personalized, context-sensitive approaches over standardized algorithms.

Moreover, the theological dimension of character formation underscores the belief in God's active presence in moral growth. Francis's personalist theology affirms that virtue cultivation is not a purely human endeavor but involves grace and divine accompaniment.[33] This conviction situates mental health within a transcendent horizon, where suffering becomes an opportunity for conversion and transformation.

The communal aspect of virtue cultivation further highlights the importance of social and relational contexts. Virtue ethics understands individuals as embedded within communities that nurture and sustain ethical life.[34] Mental health, therefore, involves relational healing that restores not only brokenness within the individual but also in their interpersonal and communal relationships.

In practical terms, this perspective encourages mental health professionals to foster environments that support character development through relational presence, ethical modeling, and engagement with patients' narratives.[35] Such care requires attentiveness to patients as whole persons—embodied, relational, and spiritual beings—not merely as collections of symptoms or data points.

Finally, the challenge of integrating AI into mental health calls for thoughtful ethical guidelines that respect this holistic vision. AI's role should be explicitly designed to complement human virtue and character formation, facilitating supportive functions while preserving space

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32 Kelly, "Pope Francis Virtue Ethicist?," 71.
33 *Ibid.*, 81.
34 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219–220.
35 Peteet, *Doing the Right Thing*, 43–44.

for human moral agency and relational depth. This integration requires ongoing dialogue between ethicists, clinicians, technologists, and communities to ensure that technological advances promote rather than undermine the flourishing of the body, mind, and spirit.

In sum, the Christian virtue ethics framework invites a profound rethinking of mental health care in the age of AI. It centers the formation of character and the cultivation of virtues as indispensable to authentic healing. AI, while a valuable tool, remains secondary to the relational, moral, and spiritual work that sustains human flourishing. Upholding this priority affirms the dignity of the person and the enduring necessity of human presence, judgment, and love in mental health.

Conclusion

The integration of artificial intelligence into mental health care presents promising opportunities to enhance accessibility, efficiency, and personalized support. However, such technological advances must be critically situated within a holistic and ethically grounded framework that respects the full complexity of the human person. Drawing from Christian virtue ethics and theological anthropology, mental health is understood as an integrative process of flourishing involving the body, mind, and spirit within relational and moral contexts.[36] This perspective challenges reductionist and technocratic approaches that risk fragmenting care into mere symptom management or data optimization.

At the core of this framework lies the conviction that authentic healing necessitates the formation of moral character and the cultivation of virtues such as compassion, humility, and courage. Pope Francis's emphasis on interior conversion, discernment, and communal belonging exemplifies the continuing relevance of virtue ethics within contemporary mental health discourse. While AI serves as a valuable adjunct, it remains inherently limited in its ability to engage the spiritual, ethical, and relational dimensions essential to true mental well-being.

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[36] Ivan Platovnjak, "Meeting the Spiritual Needs of a Dying Person," *Nova prisutnost* 20, no. 1 (2022): 59, 72, https://doi.org/10.31192/np.20.1.4.

Accordingly, AI's role is best understood as complementary rather than substitutive—supporting human caregivers in nurturing virtue and relational presence without supplanting the irreplaceable moral agency of the human person. The ethical deployment of AI in mental health demands ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration to ensure that technological innovation promotes holistic flourishing and safeguards human dignity.

Ultimately, mental health care remains a profoundly human endeavor, situated at the intersection of science, ethics, and spirituality. Amid rapid technological evolution, upholding the primacy of character formation and relational care offers a crucial corrective and guidepost. This vision invites hope, reverence, and humility as society navigates the opportunities and challenges inherent in integrating AI into the sacred work of healing.

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THE NEW ESCAPE: REALITY, VIRTUALITY, AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Jonas Miklavčič

Introduction

The question of what constitutes escapism has long revealed essential aspects of a society's pressures, desires, and metaphysical anxieties. In modernity, "reality" has frequently been construed as a realm of obligation and finitude, while escape pointed toward intoxication, imagination, or transcendence—domains promising relief from the weight of the real.[1] Digital technologies have significantly altered this dynamic, creating immersive spaces that blur the boundary between reality and its alternatives.

In this context, Tom Waits' remark, "Reality is for people who can't face drugs," is especially resonant. On the surface, it functions as dark humor, reversing the usual understanding of escapism. But it also gestures toward a deeper philosophical inversion: reality itself becomes a coping mechanism for those overwhelmed by heightened or altered states of experience. The concept of "the real" becomes increasingly unstable.

Building on this paradox, we might suggest a contemporary analog: "Reality is for people who can't face virtuality." Like Waits' line, the inversion is ironic, yet it reflects a genuine shift. Virtual spaces once

[1] This article was written as part of the research program P6-0269 *Religion, Ethics, Education and Challenges of Contemporary Society*, and research project J6-60105 *Theology and Digitalisation. Anthropological and Ethical Challenges*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

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represented an escape from the real; now, the "real" is increasingly perceived as an escape from the virtual. This reversal signals a significant transformation in the existential and cultural functions of both domains.

This article reflects on that transformation. Rather than offering rigid definitions of reality, virtuality, or religious experience, it seeks to trace an emerging experiential pattern—one marked by digital exhaustion, existential longing, and a surprising turn toward experiential forms that were once associated with the sacred. The approach is phenomenological and interpretive: it does not aim at causal explanation but explores how contemporary escapism is lived, structured, and rendered meaningful. In this sense, it aligns with the broader tradition of phenomenological inquiry into culture and religion.

This argument proceeds by tracing the historical reimagining of virtuality, analyzing the burdens of hyperpresence, and examining the paradox of a hypervirtualized "reality." Along this path, we argue that contemporary escapism is not merely about rest, but about the search for a qualitatively different mode of experience—one that bears structural resemblance to religious life, even if it no longer claims religious content.

From Reality to Virtuality—and Back Again

In the late twentieth century, virtuality was frequently framed as an escape from the burdens of embodied existence. Digital spaces—most notably video games—offered anonymity, identity play, and freedom from social and material consequences. For many, the virtual was not an extension of reality but an alternative to it.

Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* cast online environments as laboratories for multiple selves, where individuals could experiment with roles and narratives beyond the rigidity of offline identity.[2] The internet thus emerged as a psychological and cultural frontier, where experimentation and self-construction supplanted the givenness of the real.

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[2] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

Similarly, theorists such as Jean Baudrillard provided a more critical but equally far-reaching interpretation. In his theory of hyperreality, virtual spaces can function as *simulacra*—detached from referential reality and increasingly replacing it. These simulations did not merely mask or distort the real but produced a separate reality altogether, one governed by its own internal logic of signs, symbols, and spectacles.[3] As such, virtuality came to be seen as a domain where the messiness, limitations, and pain of real life could be bypassed—an imagined horizon of fluidity, excess, and control.

Today, however, this trajectory has reversed. Virtuality is no longer primarily imagined as a refuge; instead, cultural discourse increasingly speaks of escaping from it. Phrases such as "digital detox," "offline retreats," and "disconnect to reconnect" point to a wider affective shift: where virtuality once symbolized liberation, it now evokes overstimulation, fatigue, and estrangement. This reversal raises philosophical questions. The celebrated movement from reality to virtuality has looped back, with renewed appeals for embodied, "authentic" experience. Yet this return is ambiguous and shaped by the very digital infrastructures it seeks to escape. What emerges is a deeper transformation: from virtuality as an escape from reality to reality as an escape from virtuality, signaling not just a change in preference, but a reconfiguration of experience, embodiment, and meaning itself.

Virtuality Has Become Too Real

So, what exactly are we escaping from? It would be too simplistic to claim that virtuality has become unbearable because it is somehow "less real." In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true: today's digital experience is overwhelmingly real—and it is precisely this *hyperreality* that makes it unbearable.

Virtuality today is no longer a lightweight simulation or detached realm of play. It is saturated with consequence, interwoven with our identities, and present in nearly every corner of daily life. Its

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[3] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

psychological and existential weight stems not from its artificiality but from its relentless intensity and all-encompassing presence.

We can identify several interrelated characteristics that define this new digital condition:

Excessive responsiveness. Every digital action invites immediate reactions—likes, comments, replies, and reposts. This creates a constant loop of feedback, validation seeking, and even surveillance. The individual is never left alone; we are always on display, always potentially interrupted. This dynamic of real-time responsiveness has been linked to stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly among younger users.[4]

Constant presence. Digital life is omnipresent—on our wrists, in our pockets, on our nightstands. Notifications arrive around the clock. There is no longer a meaningful separation between "being online" and "being offline"; the digital seeps into every spatial and temporal context. As Sherry Turkle observes, the smartphone has become a "place" we go to (even a place of hope)—not just a tool we can simply put down.[5]

Perpetual performativity. Everything we do online becomes a kind of performance. Even supposedly private or intimate gestures—text messages, selfies, or birthday wishes—are rendered in anticipation of an audience. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* finds renewed relevance here: we no longer live our lives directly, but through representations of ourselves staged for others.[6] Social media environments, by design, intensify this theatrical mode of being.

Real-world consequences. Our digital actions now have significant and lasting impacts. A tweet may cost someone their job. A photo may damage a relationship. A moment of online shame may persist for years. The distinction between "virtual" and "real" consequences

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[4] Cecilie Schou Andreassen, Ståle Pallesen and Mark D Griffiths, "The Relationship Between Addictive Use of Social Media, Narcissism, and Self-Esteem: Findings from a Large National Survey," *Addictive Behaviors* 64 (2017): 287–293, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.03.006; Melissa G. Hunt, Rachel Marx, Courtney Lipson and Jordyn Young, "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): 751–768, https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751.

[5] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 3.

[6] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

has collapsed. Scholars such as danah boyd have explored how digital participation increasingly involves reputational and inequality risks, addiction, and emotional toll.[7]

Permanence of digital memory. The virtual never forgets. Our digital past—tweets, photos, searches, and messages—remains constantly accessible, ready to be resurfaced, reinterpreted, or weaponized. As Viktor Mayer-Schönberger puts it, we are remembering too much and forgetting too little.[8] There is no erasure, no clean break from our past selves, which would allow us to live in a forward-looking way.

These structural features of digital life are not merely anecdotal; they are corroborated by a growing body of empirical research. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Keles, McCrae, and Grealish confirms strong correlations between social media use and elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents.[9] Twenge and Haidt et al. further demonstrate that the sharp rise in anxiety and depressive symptoms among teenagers since 2012 aligns with increased smartphone and social media use, especially among girls.[10] According to a 2023 U.S. Surgeon General advisory, social media platforms present a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.[11] The contribution of social networks to feelings of loneliness is also often highlighted.[12]

These findings suggest that virtuality today does not alleviate the burdens of real life—it amplifies them. It offers no silence, no pause, no

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7 danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

8 Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

9 Betul Keles, Niall McCrae and Annmarie Grealish, "A Systematic Review: The Influence of Social Media on Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Adolescents," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no. 1 (2019): 79–93, https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851.

10 Jean M. Twenge, Jonathan Haidt, Jimmy Lozano and Kevin M. Cummins, "Specification curve analysis shows that social media use is linked to poor mental health, especially among girls," *Acta Psychologica* 224 (2022): 103512, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512.

11 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (Washington, D.C.: HHS, 2023), 6–7.

12 David Kraner, "Osamljenost in raztresenost v mreži socialnih medijev," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83(4) (2023): 1003–1020, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Kraner.

safe interiority. Its very responsiveness, its permanence, and its omnipresence create a condition of continuous exposure and self-regulation. The problem with virtuality is not that it has failed to deliver a realistic experience, but because it delivers *too much* of it, *too relentlessly*, and with *too little refuge*.

We do not flee virtuality because it is artificial. We flee because it feels all too real.

The Hypervirtuality of "Reality"

Where, then, do we escape to? Ostensibly, toward "reality"—nature, silence, slowness, and embodiment. Yet this "reality" is no longer a pre-digital sphere untouched by mediation. It is curated and stylized, shaped by algorithmic trends and aesthetic expectations born of the very platforms we seek to resist. For the younger generations, reality outside of digital frames scarcely exists: there is no memory of a world unmediated by smartphones or social feeds. Even retreats to mountains or villages are pre-framed by Instagram's grammar of images and captions. What is presented as "offline" is often more hyper-mediated than the online—the "real" becoming another filter, another form of content.[13]

This is a mode of *hypervirtuality*: reality constructed in reference to screens, not as ontological otherness but as reality-as-content. Travel or leisure often confirm online templates—the forest as it appears on Pinterest, the cappuccino as styled in lifestyle reels. Thus, escape from virtuality does not lead into a separate register but into a different mode of the virtual: one more analog, aestheticized, and performatively "real." Yet this supposed authenticity quickly re-enters the circuits of mediation. The cabin retreat becomes a story; the slow morning a reel. What promised withdrawal becomes another cycle of visibility and recognition. The logic of the platform remains intact.

Our contemporary escapism, then, is not ontological but experiential. Given the deep interconnection between reality and virtuality, the

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[13] Nathan Jurgenson, "The IRL Fetish," *The New Inquiry*, June 28, 2012, https://thenewinquiry.com/the-irl-fetish/.

issue is no longer which is "real" but what feels real: experiences that are quieter, slower, and affectively grounding—even if scaffolded by algorithms.

Escapism as a Quest for a Different Mode of Experience

Although we can never fully escape virtuality, because it dictates how we see reality in the first place, when we examine closely what people intuitively seek by escaping virtuality, we do not discover a naïve desire to return to a pre-digital world. What emerges instead is a more subtle, experiential pattern: a longing for a different *quality* of being. A mode of experience that feels less performative, less fractured, and less exposed. People are drawn not simply to "reality," but to moments and environments that offer a palpable alternative to the rhythms of digital life—experiences marked by a kind of existential resonance that has become difficult to find online, but much easier to find in nature, for example.[14]

We can identify several recurring characteristics in the kinds of experiences people seek when they try to "disconnect." These features are not unified by a specific ideology or cultural program, but they reveal a shared affective grammar—something deeply felt yet rarely named directly.

Silence

People crave moments free from notifications, pings, messages, and algorithmically curated chatter. Silence, in this sense, is not merely the absence of sound, but the absence of summons. It signals relief from being constantly addressed and expected to respond. Contemporary research confirms that exposure to constant alerts and multitasking environments is associated with increased stress, diminished cognitive

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[14] Bojan Žalec, "Religija in narava v luči Rosove teorije resonance," *Poligrafi* 26, no. 103/104 (2021): 5–22, https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2021.298.

performance, and emotional fatigue.[15] Silence, by contrast, is increasingly experienced as a rare luxury—one associated with clarity and presence.[16]

Solitude

In digital life, solitude is structurally undermined. Even when physically alone, we remain tethered to others through our devices—our gestures, thoughts, and appearances constantly co-present with invisible audiences. Escaping virtuality often means reclaiming genuine solitude: time when one is not performing, not curating, and not anticipating feedback.[17] Solitude here is not antisocial; it is foundational for depth and reflection.

Meaning

In virtual environments, meaning often becomes fragmented—measured in clicks, metrics, and virality. Escapism signals a yearning for experiences that feel intrinsically valuable, not externally validated. Whether walking in nature, reading a physical book, or sharing unmediated conversation, people seek moments where value arises inherently from *being*, not broadcasting.[18]

Non-responsiveness

People increasingly desire environments that do *not* respond to their input. We have already mentioned that in the digital age, we always need to be available to the world. But the world must also always

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15 Gloria Mark, *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity* (Hanover Square Press, 2023).

16 Justin Zorn and Leigh Marz, *Golden: The Power of Silence in a World of Noise* (New York: Harper Wave, 2022).

17 Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio, 2019).

18 Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2020).

respond to us immediately. The appeal of alone time, and thus certain landscapes and nature, is often in not getting feedback on everything you do.[19]

Withdrawal from Productivity

The logic of productivity permeates not only our work lives but our leisure, our self-presentation, and even our healing. The concept of the "optimized self" thrives online, where users are encouraged to track, improve, and publicize their progress. Escapism often involves a desire to *not* produce anything—to dwell in uselessness, slowness, or inefficiency without guilt. This is evident in the popularity of "doing nothing" retreats, walking without purpose, or spending time with no agenda.[20] In this sense, holidays are sometimes said to be an escape from reality.

Timelessness

The digital world is marked by micro-temporalities—refresh rates, countdowns, and algorithmic prioritizations. Many escapist experiences aim to suspend this sense of time: to enter moments that feel outside linear progression. This is often described phenomenologically as "flow" or "presence," but it may also echo something deeper—a longing to inhabit a time not governed by urgency, deadlines, or FOMO (fear of missing out).[21]

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[19] Stephen Kaplan, "The Restorative Benefits of Nature: Toward an Integrative Framework," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1995): 169–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-4944(95)90001-2.

[20] Andrew Smart, *Autopilot: The Art and Science of Doing Nothing* (New York City: OR Books, 2013).

[21] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

Interior Depth

Perhaps most elusive is the craving for undivided interiority. Much of digital life is externalized. The notion of a purely internal experience, one that is not posted, documented, or liked, becomes rare. Escapist moments reclaim this hiddenness. Doing things for yourself only. Not only »performing for yourself«, but not performing at all. Just being.[22]

What we are witnessing is longing not just for disconnection, but for an entirely different *mode* of being in the world—a mode of being that is deeply resonant of a very specific experience.

Religious Traditions and the Experience

At first glance, the desires outlined in the previous section—silence, solitude, meaning, non-responsiveness, timelessness, and interiority—seem thoroughly contemporary, secular, and even practical. They may appear as nothing more than a natural psychological response to the overstimulation of digital life. And yet, when we pause and reflect, something fascinating emerges.

All of these characteristics are, in fact, fundamental elements of experience as it has been described across the centuries in religious, spiritual, and theological reflection. Without necessarily knowing it, the modern subject fleeing the hyper-responsiveness of virtual life is seeking out an experiential mode long cultivated in religious traditions. The escape from virtuality reveals not simply a desire for calm, but a latent longing for something fairly similar to what religious phenomenology has identified as sacred experience.

Silence, for example, has always occupied a central place in contemplative traditions. Thomas Merton, the 20th-century Trappist monk, discusses silence extensively in his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, where he explores silence as a spiritual practice, the language of God, and a path to healing and communion.[23] His writings emphasize silence as essential to genuine contemplation, highlighting its role in

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22 Turkle, *Alone Together*.

23 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 2007).

overcoming the noise and fragmentation of modern life. Merton also reflects deeply on silence in his journals and essays, such as *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* and various poetic meditations where silence is linked to stillness, listening, and the inner life.[24]

Solitude likewise emerges not as isolation, but as the context in which deeper truths are encountered. Early Christian monastics—the so-called Desert Fathers—retreated into the wilderness not to abandon the world, but to come closer to what they saw as the ultimate reality.[25] In solitude, they found freedom from public performance and worldly attachment, allowing the self to open to the divine. Contemporary secular practices of retreat and digital detox echo these movements, even if stripped of their explicit theological framework.

Meaning—or what William James called the "noetic quality" of religious experience—is the sense that an event, moment, or presence communicates something fundamentally *true,* which is revealed and full of significance.[26] In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James identifies this quality as central to spiritual states: they convey insight that feels authoritative, even if it cannot be fully articulated. Many of the experiences that people seek today—whether watching the sunrise alone, immersing themselves in nature, or sharing unmediated conversation—bear this noetic texture. They feel meaningful in a way that resists commodification or algorithmic explanation.

Non-responsiveness, too, plays a crucial role in religious phenomenology. James again notes the feeling of *passivity* in religious episodes—where the individual does not *create* the experience, but *receives* it, experiences it, almost as a mystical state.[27] The sacred does not obey our commands. Unlike the digital realm, where every swipe or tap generates a programmed outcome, the religious domain is often non-responsive and especially not under our control.

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[24] Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1996).

[25] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 55–56.

[26] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 295.

[27] *Ibid.*, 295–296.

Withdrawal from productivity finds resonance in mystical traditions where *uselessness* becomes the gateway to divine presence. Evelyn Underhill, in her classic study *Mysticism*, describes the purgative phase in which the mystic detaches from worldly obligations to enter contemplative stillness.[28] The refusal to produce becomes the very condition for receptivity.

Timelessness is likewise a core attribute of sacred experience. Mircea Eliade, in *The Sacred and the Profane*, describes the religious festival or ritual as a "break" in ordinary time (as usually understood in a historical sense)—a moment that accesses *illud tempus*, the sacred "time of origin," which is the source of meaning.[29] In such moments, linearity is suspended. Almost as a "time outside of time." This echoes contemporary longing for "presence," for moments that seem to escape the countdowns and notifications of virtual time.

Finally, interior depth—the sense of having an inner life that is not subject to public visibility—is perhaps the most endangered aspect of modern existence, and yet it is at the heart of classical mysticism. In her *Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Ávila described the soul's journey inward as a progression through "mansions" toward union with the divine.[30] This movement is not outward, not communicative, not performative. It is intensely private, and it is precisely that privacy that renders it sacred.

The experiences being sought align with what religious traditions have preserved across the centuries. In this sense, we may be witnessing a secular rediscovery of something rather familiar. The person turning off their phone, retreating into the forest, or sitting in candlelight may not think of themselves as religious, yet their desire follows ancient paths: silence over noise, contemplation over feedback, presence over reaction.

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[28] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Cristian Classic Ethereal Library, 2010), 301–305, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/u/underhill/mysticism/cache/mysticism.pdf.

[29] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957), 68–72.

[30] Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1961).

Escaping Virtuality as a Structurally Religious Practice

Terms and Method: Phenomenological, Not Theological

Before turning to the arguments, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by *religious*, *sacred*, and *transcendent* in the present context. These terms are not used in a theological or dogmatic sense, but phenomenologically—that is, as categories describing modes of human experience rather than propositional belief. By *religious*, following William James, we refer to experiences that carry a noetic quality—an authority of felt truth, even when non-discursive—and that involve transformation of the self's relation to reality.[31] The *sacred*, in Mircea Eliade's sense, is that which interrupts ordinary experience, creating a break in profane time and space.[32] It marks an encounter with otherness, often mediated by ritual or symbol, which reorganizes the experiential field. *Transcendence*, in a phenomenological interpretation, does not necessarily point to metaphysical realities but to experiences of excess—what Rudolf Otto named the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, simultaneously overwhelming and attractive.[33]

Taken together, these categories converge in what can be described as a *religious experience*. Following the clarification above, we can say that by religious experience, we mean a patterned ensemble of withdrawal from ordinary time and space, entry into a set-apart field marked by silence and slowness, cultivation through rules and practices, accompanied by awe or renewal, and culminating in reintegration and testimony. This is an analytical construct, not a theological verdict. If contemporary practices realize this same ensemble, then phenomenologically they can belong to the same category of experience, whether or not the participants call them "religious."

Drawing from phenomenology and ritual theory (James, Otto, Eliade, and Turner), the following criteria may be taken as diagnostic:

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[31] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

[32] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

[33] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923).

a temporal dimension set apart from ordinary time; a spatial dimension of withdrawal or consecrated boundary; ascetic or rule-governed practices; an affective–noetic core of awe, depth, or authenticity; a liminal stage often accompanied by communitas; and finally, reintegration through testimony. What follows is an attempt to show that contemporary practices of digital disconnection do not merely resemble these criteria superficially but actually instantiate them.

Six Propositions Arguing for Structural Identity

1. Sanctified Time

Digital detox practices frequently codify time in ways directly comparable to religious sanctification. The *National Day of Unplugging* is a sundown-to-sundown fast from devices, explicitly inspired by the Sabbath Manifesto.[34] Participants ritually "power down" for 24 hours to recover reflection and presence. Similarly, the practice of *Tech Shabbat* institutionalizes a weekly rhythm of disconnection, complete with domestic liturgies of preparation.[35] These are not casual pauses but calendrical consecrations, structurally analogous to the religious distinction between profane and sacred time. They realize Eliade's account of festival time, which interrupts the profane order, and James's description of religious states as authoritative re-centerings of life.

2. Set-Apart Space

Just as sacred experience has always required consecrated space, disconnection today is architected through spatial thresholds. Digital detox retreats such as *Camp Grounded* require surrendering phones at the gate and enforce rules of anonymity—ritual boundaries that transform the site into a liminal enclave.[36] Phone-free technologies such as *Yondr* pouches, or Getaway cabins with lockboxes, similarly create literal

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[34] National Day of Unplugging, "Our Mission," accessed September 27, 2025, https://www.globaldayofunplugging.org/our-mission.

[35] Tiffany Shlain, *24/6: The Power of Unplugging One Day a Week* (New York: Gallery Books, 2019).

[36] "The Camp Grounded® Experience," *Digital Detox*, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.digitaldetox.com/experiences/camp-grounded/.

sanctuaries of disconnection. The logic is unmistakably spatial: crossing a threshold, leaving ordinary life, and entering a set-apart sphere. This mirrors Eliade's sacred/profane axis and Turner's description of the desert or the hut as liminal sanctuaries.[37]

3. Ascetic Discipline

Religious experience has never been a matter of spontaneous feeling alone; it is cultivated through disciplines and ascetic rules. Contemporary disconnection has this structure. Ten-day Vipassana retreats, for example, require strict silence, surrendering devices, and abstention from reading or writing. Secular mindfulness centers such as IMS impose schedules and ethical rules to protect the silence. These are digital fasts in the strict sense: suspensions of gratification to re-attune attention. Asceticism is not incidental here but essential; it is through this ritual deprivation that the experience acquires its transformative force. Digital fasting, in this sense, is structurally identical to traditional fasting.

4. Affective–Noetic Core

The goal of such practices is not merely relaxation but the cultivation of effects of awe, depth, and renewal—the very qualities James and Otto identified at the heart of religious experience. Empirical studies support this: "awe walks" have been shown to increase prosocial orientation.[38] Forest bathing reduces cortisol and stress,[39] and systematic reviews of digital detox interventions report enhanced attention, reflection, and connectedness.[40] Participants consistently describe their experience in

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[37] Turner, Victor, "Liminality and Communitas," In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

[38] Nicholas Weiler, "'Awe Walks' Boost Emotional Well-Being," *UCSF News* (UC San Francisco), September 21, 2020, https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2020/09/418551/awe-walks-boost-emotional-well-being.

[39] Hiroko Ochiai, Harumi Ekei, Chorong Song et al., "Physiological and Psychological Effects of a Forest Therapy Program on Middle-Aged Females," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12, no. 12 (2015): 15222–15232, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph121214984.

[40] Theda Radtke, Theresa Apel, Konstantin Schenkel et al., "Digital Detox: An Effective Solution in the Smartphone Era? A Systematic Literature Review," *Mobile Media & Communication* 10, no. 2 (2021): 190–215, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157921102864 7.

terms of authenticity and self-reformation. This affective–noetic core is not reducible to utility. It carries the same structure as the numinous: a felt intensity and authority that reorganizes the self.

5. Liminality and the Pilgrimage Arc

Victor Turner's model of pilgrimage—separation, liminality, communitas, and reintegration—provides a precise analogy. Detox practices follow the same arc. Participants undergo a marked separation (surrendering devices and entering retreat), pass through a liminal stage of silence and discipline, and often experience a heightened sense of community. They then return to ordinary life, narrating the transformation. The sequence is not incidental but constitutive: it is exactly what defines a pilgrimage as a structure of experience.[41] To withdraw from digital life, endure its discipline, and re-emerge with renewed orientation is to re-enact a pilgrimage in a secular form.

6. Testimony and Return

The paradox of posting about one's retreat is often criticized as hypocrisy. Yet in fact, the testimony upon return is part of the structure of religious experience itself. Pilgrims have always returned with souvenirs, stories, and ex-votos. Testimony completes the experience, integrating it into communal life. Studies of media refusal show that abstention is frequently narrated publicly to establish authenticity and identity. The popularity of #DigitalDetoxDay or reflective blog posts demonstrates that people feel compelled to witness their withdrawal. Far from undermining the practice, such testimony confirms its structural religiosity: it is the modern form of the pilgrim's report.

These practices cannot be reduced to stress relief. If they were simply about relaxation, any leisure activity would suffice. Instead, the structures correspond precisely to what phenomenology of religion has long described as sacred. What grows, therefore, is not a therapeutic pastime but a secular ritual—experiences shaped to reach beyond utility, productivity, and everyday time.

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41 Turner, "Liminality and Communitas."

Conclusion: Toward a Secularized Sacred

The question that has guided this article is whether contemporary escapes from virtuality are merely pragmatic forms of stress management or whether they manifest something deeper. The analysis suggests that the latter is the case. Although casual strategies of self-care, these practices instantiate the very structures that the phenomenology of religion has long described as definitive of religious experience of the sacred: withdrawal into set-apart times and spaces, the adoption of ascetic rules and ritualized practices, the cultivation of awe and renewal, the passage through liminal stages, and the return to ordinary life with testimony.

To be sure, one might object that such practices cannot be equated with religion in any theological sense. Yet the claim advanced here is not that they reproduce doctrinal content but that they replicate the structure of the experience itself. What is sought when one locks away the phone for a weekend or enters a retreat of silence is not merely rest. It is a mode of experience that interrupts the utilitarian, performative, and hyper-responsive rhythms of digital life, and that offers instead depth, authenticity, and renewal. In this sense, the longing to disconnect is not reducible to wellness; it is a secularized enactment of a deeper form.

This conclusion reframes the paradox of our time. We may not be seeking "the holy itself" when we leave the digital behind, yet we are unmistakably reaching for something that bears the same architecture as religious experience. The very shape of these practices confirms that they function as modern, secularized pilgrimages. The impulse to escape virtuality is therefore best understood not as nostalgia for a pre-digital world, but as an attempt to recover, in new idioms, the experiential structures once cultivated in religious life.

The contemporary flight from virtuality thus points beyond itself. It testifies to a persistent human desire for a form of experience that transcends productivity, control, and performativity. In seeking silence, presence, and authenticity, the digital subject unwittingly re-enacts the sacred. What we find in such escapes is perhaps not theology, but an architecture of transcendence that persists even when stripped of explicit reference to the holy.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS: THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE PITFALLS OF ALIENATION

David Kraner

Introduction[1]

In today's educational landscape, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the teaching and learning process is becoming increasingly relevant and necessary.[2]

[1] This paper was written as a result of work within the research project *Theology and digitalization: anthropological and ethical challenges* (J6-60105) which is co-funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

[2] Tugra Karademir Coskun and Ayfer Alper, "Evaluating the Evaluators: A Comparative Study of AI and Teacher Assessments in Higher Education," *Digital Education Review*, no. 45 (2024), 124–39, https://doi.org/10.1344/der.2024.45.124-140; Tevfik Uyar, "ASI as the New God: Technocratic Theocracy," *arXiv:2406.08492* (2024), 1–17, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2406.08492; Fraser Watts and Yorick Alexander Wilks, "Spiritual Conversation with a Companion Machine," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 3, no. 59 (2024): 676–91, https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.11087; Ozan Filiz, Mehmet Haldun Kaya, and Tufan Adiguzel, "Teachers and AI: Understanding the Factors Influencing AI Integration in K-12 Education," *Education and Information Technologies*, (2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-025-13463-2; Xiao Tan, Gary Cheng and Man Ho Ling, "Artificial Intelligence in Teaching and Teacher Professional Development: A Systematic Review," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 8, no. 1 (2025): 100355, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100355; Andrea Fernández-Sánchez, Juan José Lorenzo-Castiñeiras and Ana Sánchez-Bello, "Navigating the Future of Pedagogy: The Integration of AI Tools in Developing Educational Assessment Rubrics," *European Journal of Education* 60, no. 1 (2024): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12826; Matt Miller, *AI for Educators. Learning Strategies, Teacher Efficiencies, and a Vision for an Artificial Intelligence Future* (San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting, 2023); José Antonio Bowen and C. Edward Watson,

Teachers and researchers are striving to understand how AI impacts the quality of teaching and learning, particularly its limitations, benefits, and potential pitfalls. At the center of these discussions is the question of what is gained—and what is at risk—when AI is introduced into the educational process. Some authors emphasize the many advantages of AI use, such as explaining complex concepts, enabling interactive experiences,[3] fostering critical thinking,[4] and increasing student motivation and engagement.[5] Yim and Wegerif, in a study involving 60 teachers, examined the adoption of AI literacy among younger students and found that teachers recognize both the potential and the need for support, highlighting the importance of content knowledge and infrastructural backing for teachers.[6]

Others emphasize that AI is far from a neutral tool, as its use can exacerbate existing inequalities, weaken interpersonal relationships, and lead to a loss of the human dimension in education.[7] In an international study of 508 teachers, Viberg et al. found that a higher level of self-efficacy and understanding of AI correlated with greater trust in

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Teaching with AI : A Practical Guide to a New Era of Human Learning (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

3 Fan Ouyang, Mian Wu, Luyi Zheng, Liyin Zhang and Pengcheng Jiao, "Integration of Artificial Intelligence Performance Prediction and Learning Analytics to Improve Student Learning in Online Engineering Course," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 20, no. 4 (2023): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-022-00372-4; Ting-Ting Wu, Hsin-Yu Lee, Pin-Hui Li, Chia-Nan Huang and Yueh-Min Huang, "Promoting Self-Regulation Progress and Knowledge Construction in Blended Learning via ChatGPT-Based Learning Aid," *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 61, no. 8 (2024): 1539–67, https://doi.org/10.1177/07356331231191125.

4 Yun Dai, Ziyan Lin, Ang Liu, Dan Dai and Wenlan Wang, "Effect of an Analogy-Based Approach of Artificial Intelligence Pedagogy in Upper Primary Schools," *Journal of Educational Computing Research* 61, no. 8 (2023): 1695–1722, https://doi.org/10.1177/07356331231201342.

5 Wu, Lee, Li, Huang and Huang, "Promoting Self-Regulation Progress and Knowledge Construction in Blended Learning via ChatGPT-Based Learning Aid," 1539–67.

6 Iris Yim and Rupert Wegerif, "Teachers' Perceptions, Attitudes, and Acceptance of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Educational Learning Tools: An Exploratory Study on AI Literacy for Young Students," *Future in Educational Research* 2 (2024): 318–45, https://doi.org/10.1002/fer3.65.

7 Gabriel Julien, "How Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impacts Inclusive Education," *Educational Research and Reviews* 19, (2024): 95–103, https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2024.4404; Seufert, Guggemos and Sailer, "Technology-Related Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Pre- and in-Service Teachers," 106552.

these tools. Concerns remain high, however, indicating a clear need for teacher training and professional development.[8]

Contemporary pedagogical approaches aim for inclusive environments, with increasing attention paid to students with diverse needs. However, challenges such as reduced attention due to technology,[9] inadequate infrastructure, lack of financial resources, and insufficient teacher training hinder the effective implementation of AI.[10] Beyond these technical and organizational barriers, teachers often express resistance to AI, driven by feelings of uncertainty, lack of knowledge, and fear of losing control over the learning process.[11] Hartmut Rosa warns that modern technologies (including AI) can threaten authentic resonance in the educational process. When technology is not used thoughtfully, it can disrupt genuine connections between students, teachers, and educational content.[12]

The aim of this paper is not only to highlight the positive and negative aspects of AI in education. This article poses a central research question: what role does communication play in the educational process,

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8 Olga Viberg, Mutlu Cukurova, Yael Feldman-Maggor, Giora Alexandron, Shizuka Shirai, Susumu Kanemune, Barbara Wasson, et al. "What Explains Teachers' Trust of AI in Education across Six Countries?," *arXiv*:2312.01627, 2023, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2312.01627.

9 Christina A. Roberto et al., "Patchy Progress on Obesity Prevention: Emerging Examples, Entrenched Barriers, and New Thinking," *The Lancet* 9985, no. 385 (2015): 2400–2409, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61744-x .

10 Julien, "How Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impacts Inclusive Education," 95–103. Rosemary Luckin, Mutlu Cukurova, Carmel Kent and Benedict du Boulay, "Empowering Educators to Be AI-Ready," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 3 (2022): 100076, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2022.100076.

11 Musa Adekunle Ayanwale, Ismaila Temitayo Sanusi, Owolabi Paul Adelana, Kehinde D Aruleba and Solomon Sunday Oyelere, "Teachers' Readiness and Intention to Teach Artificial Intelligence in Schools," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, no. 3 (2022): 100099, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2022.100099; Sabine Seufert, Josef Guggemos and Michael Sailer, "Technology-Related Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes of Pre- and in-Service Teachers: The Current Situation and Emerging Trends." *Computers in Human Behavior* 115 (2021): 106552, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106552.

12 Virginia Lérida-Ayala, José Manuel Aguilar-Parra, Rocío Collado-Soler, Marina Alférez-Pastor, Juan Miguel Fernández-Campoy and Antonio Luque-de la Rosa, "Internet and Video Games: Causes of Behavioral Disorders in Children and Teenagers," *Children (Basel)* 10, no. 1 (2022): 1-18, https://doi.org/10.3390/children10010086; Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

and can the appropriate integration of AI lead to better learning outcomes while preserving the human dimension of education?

Through a systematic review of the literature and analysis of existing practices, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of both the possibilities and limitations of AI in modern learning environments and to offer recommendations for its meaningful integration into pedagogical practice.

The Core of the Educational Process: Not Information, but Risk and Resonance

The learning process is not merely the transmission of information; it encompasses a holistic form of communication and relationship between the teacher, the learner, and the content within a particular environment. It is an intertwining of emotional and intellectual dimensions.[13] This means that a student requires a tangible relationship, personal connection, emotional warmth, attentive care, and the satisfaction of co-creating.[14] When these basic needs are not met, tensions or even conflicts can arise.[15] French sociologist and anthropologist Philippe Breton argues that when a person is unable to express themselves through words, they resort to force. We live in a time when the meaning of words is diminishing, and communication is reduced merely to the exchange of information.[16]

What matters for a human being is not only intellectual ability, but also emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman explains that both an emotional mind and a rational mind operate within us—one that thinks,

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13 Iva Nežič Glavica, "Resonanca in edukacija: temeljni poudarki resonančne pedagogike skozi prizmo resonančnih odnosov," *Bogoslovni Vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 82, no. 3(2022): 717–21, https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/File/BV/BV2022/03/NezicGlavica.pdf.

14 Roman Globokar, *Vzgojni izzivi šole v digitalni dobi* (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta, 2021).

15 Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, *Listening and Dialoguing with the World: A Philosophical and Theological-Spiritual Vision* (Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024), https://doi.org/10.34291/9789612973490.

16 Philippe Breton, *Elogio Della Parola. Il Potere Della Parola Contro La Parola Del Potere* (Elèuthera, 2004).

and one that feels.[17] It is well known that today's generations experience more emotional difficulties than previous ones. Even before the pandemic, the rise of the digital age allowed screen media to erode our emotional literacy, sense of community, self-esteem, and creativity.[18]

Risks in the Educational Process

The educational process does not operate according to market-based logic or mechanical reciprocity between input and outcome.[19] Irish public education scholar Professor Gert Biesta argues that education always involves risk. This is not the same as the risk a teacher faces due to a lack of training, nor is it the risk of insufficient scientific evidence in pedagogy, or the risk experienced by a student who fails to learn something. This kind of risk is present because it involves encounters between people rather than interactions between machines.

Biesta observes that despite this, there remains a strong desire to make education robust, safe, predictable, and risk-free. Yet this denies the reality that education always deals with living "material"—that is, with human beings, not inanimate objects.[20]

Biesta identifies three dimensions of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification.[21] The first relates to achieving educational goals and acquiring skills and knowledge/qualification. Subjectification refers to an interest in the individuals who are being educated. Learners are not objects but people actively engaged in and responsible for the process. Socialization explores how individuals become part of existing social structures through education. Subjectification, by contrast, addresses modes of being that are not shaped solely by social arrangements or traditions.

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17 Daniel Goleman, *Čustvena inteligenca: zakaj je lahko pomembnejša od IQ* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1997), 23.

18 Globokar, *Vzgojni izzivi šole v digitalni dobi*.

19 Iva Nežič Glavica, "'Pedagogika 3.0' ali oris edukacije v digitalni dobi," *Bogoslovni vestnik/ Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2023): 1049–60, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Nezic; Nežič Glavica, "Resonanca in edukacija," 716.

20 Gert Biesta, *Vzgoja kot čudovito tveganje*, trans. Alenka Ropert (Ljubljana: Krtina, 2022), 15–16.

21 Biesta, *Vzgoja kot čudovito tveganje*, 37.

Biesta draws on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that each human being is a singularity, a unique entity. Levinas is interested in those moments in which a person feels irreplaceable—moments in which someone calls upon you, addresses you, or chooses you. These are situations in which one is exposed and, consequently, a moment of subjectivity. Uniqueness is understood as both irreplaceability and responsibility.[22]

Biesta develops this idea within the pedagogical context and suggests that Levinas' thought leaves the teacher empty-handed: each individual is responsible for their own responsibility, and what others do with theirs is entirely up to them. Responsibility cannot be imposed—it must be assumed voluntarily. The role of the teacher, then, is to ensure that they have done everything possible to create the conditions for a moment of subjectivity: situations in which students feel called, chosen, and capable of taking responsibility.[23]

Resonance in the Educational Process

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa argues that the modern human relationship with the world is increasingly shaped by acceleration—a comprehensive and intensifying pace of life that leads to various forms of social alienation. This acceleration manifests on three levels: technical acceleration refers to the constant development of new technologies; social acceleration is evident in the "liquefaction" of society—nothing remains stable, everything is in constant flux; and individual acceleration describes the increasing experience of time scarcity in everyday life. These three dimensions are interconnected, forming a closed loop of acceleration.[24]

The educational process and its participants are embedded within this context. Statistics show that around 50% of beginning teachers[25] in the U.S. leave the profession within the first five years, citing high

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22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Hague, 1981), 66.

23 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

24 Rosa, *Resonance*, 19–25.

25 Beginning teachers are defined as those who have up to five years of professional experience in the teaching profession.

stress levels, excessive workloads, and poor working conditions.[26] Many teachers report physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, often attributing it to chronic stress.[27] Although a certain degree of stress is inevitable in the teaching profession, Rosa emphasizes that this does not imply helplessness. Historically, humans had to submit to the laws of nature, but today they expect the world to submit to them. Since absolute control is impossible, individuals often experience a breakdown—depression shuts down their future prospects.[28] Rosa warns that the idea of total control is an illusion, and that attempts to force what is inherently unavailable often backfire like a boomerang.[29]

One might expect that digital tools and artificial intelligence would lead to qualitative improvements in human communication. In reality, however, we increasingly observe the impoverishment of interpersonal interaction. Words are losing their meaning, and there is a serious risk that language will be reduced to the mere transmission of data and information between devices—lacking the capacity to express the invisible, the felt, or the transcendent.[30] The French sociologist and anthropologist of communication, Philippe Breton, compares the communication world to transport systems, arguing that media "transport" words. Breton warns that our words are too often empty chatter, and that we live in an era where language is disappearing. Forgetting the weight and meaning of words, we increasingly use them in authoritarian and even violent ways. He summarizes this with a paradoxical

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[26] Dianne McKinley, "The Importance of Mentoring New Teachers," *Incompassing Eduction*, July 29, 2024, https://www.incompassinged.com/post/the-importance-of-mentoring-new-teachers; Emma Garcia and Elaine Weiss, "U.S. Schools Struggle to Hire and Retain Teachers. The Second Report in 'The Perfect Storm in the Teacher Labor Market' Series," *Economic Policy Institute*, April 16, 2019, https://www.epi.org/publication/u-s-schools-struggle-to-hire-and-retain-teachers-the-second-report-in-the-perfect-storm-in-the-teacher-labor-market-series/.

[27] Maruška Željeznov Seničar, *Promocija zdravja zaposlenih v vzgoji in izobraževanju* (Polhov Gradec: MIB, 2023).

[28] Branko Klun, "Rezilienca in resonanca: v iskanju nove drže do sveta," *Bogoslovni Vestnik/ Theological Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2020): 283, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2020/02/Klun.

[29] Rosa, *Resonance*.

[30] Fabio Pasqualetti, "Linguaggi della comunicazione e media a servizio dell'educazione," in *L'educazione, la rivoluzione possibile. Perché nessuno deve essere lasciato indietro*, ed. Fabio Pasqualetti and Vittorio Sammarco (Roma: LAS, 2020), 102.

phrase that reflects the schizophrenic nature of communication today: »Speak, but remain silent!«[31]

What happens in society is reflected in schools. Teacher burnout and depression are indicators that the logic of acceleration has entered the educational sphere. These trends highlight the urgent need for resonant relationships—relationships that allow genuine connections between teachers, students, and content. Creating a safe emotional environment, fostering empathy, and nurturing intrinsic motivation are tasks that are fundamentally impossible for artificial intelligence. While algorithms may simulate certain signs of emotional closeness, they cannot replace the human warmth and authenticity of real communication.

Human Communication in the Educational Process

Communication is a process that is only fully realized when all the participating subjects have a genuine space for cooperation. In such communication, it is not only the sender who is active, but all other subjects who decide to enter into dialogue are equally effectively involved. Franko Lever, a professor at Salesian University in Rome, argues that a good communicator is not someone who has answers to all questions, but someone who knows how to stimulate important questions, motivate, and provide answers to those seeking them. They understand that they must initiate and accompany the process from the moment it starts until the synthesis is formed at the end of the dialogue. Lever is convinced that it is not only our words, speech, writing, gestures, acting, singing, painting, etc., that communicate, but every action of ours carries communicative value. This value lies in who we are. Communication involves not only content but also the relationship.[32]

Communication holds a key place in the educational process. The methods of assessment and teaching in modern schools give the impression that students compete by accumulating information. In this

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31 Breton, *Elogio Della Parola*, 9.

32 Franco Lever, "Comunicazione. L'utilità di una definizione di riferimento," in *Dai loro frutti li riconoscerete (Mt 7,15-16): Comunicazione Coerenza Azione*, ed. Franco Lever, Fabio Pasqualetti and Antonio Presern (Roma: LAS, 2011), 20–22.

case, communication is the transfer of content from point A to point B (from the teacher, book, AI, or other tools to the student). In such technical information transfer, the teacher's role is entirely diminished or destroyed. The teacher could be replaced by a machine, which would be similar to a TV or radio signal transmitting content from the transmitter to the receiver.

Gert Biesta introduces the concept of deconstructive pragmatism, which aims to highlight a radically weak understanding of communication as the most suitable for education.[33] He refers to John Dewey and his complexity regarding educational communication[34] and Jacques Derrida, who speaks about the openness of communication.[35]

Dewey is convinced that a person's inner experience is based on language, which is a social product. Language has the natural function of connection, and its consequences influence human or physical events by giving them meaning or significance.[36] Dewey believes that communication should be understood as a process of "sharing experience." For him, cooperation is the central educational mechanism. Communication is enabled by cooperation, but it must occur with shared understanding. This is only possible when all the participants in communication are aware of a common goal, and that goal interests all the participants. Individual activities are connected with others. One cannot perform their own activities without considering the activities of others. While training involves practicing and developing oneself individually, it differs from education. Training does not involve sharing insights with others. The essence is not to transfer meaning from one person to another, but for people to be engaged in a joint activity. In education, this means that the process should involve demonstrating practices within teaching rather than demonstrating formal abstractions of those practices. Dewey does not view education as something done to students, but as something teachers and students do together.[37]

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[33] Biesta, *Vzgoja kot čudovito tveganje*, 47–71.
[34] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Dover Publications, 1958).
[35] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Cambridge: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
[36] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 171.
[37] Biesta, *Vzgoja kot čudovito tveganje*, 55–57

At this point, it is appropriate to add the transcendental element of communication. Jacques Derrida deals with the concept of the "metaphysics of presence." What is "present" also establishes a relation to what is not. When we try to define "good," we do so in relation to "evil." The very "thing" that enables "good" simultaneously destroys it. Derrida calls this logic *deconstruction*.[38] Biesta concludes this discourse with a proposal that the future of pragmatism can only be deconstructive pragmatism. He explains that this is not a destroyed, deconstructed pragmatism, but a pragmatism that only exists in communication and in the process of deconstruction.[39]

Education operates through communication, but this does not mean that it happens only through spoken or written words. It is not communication understood as the transfer of information from A to B, but communication as a generative process of cooperation: the joint making of things. At the same time, it is a process as process and contains a certain degree of risk. Removing risk means reducing communication to the transmission of information, which would strip communication of its dialogical meaning.[40]

Is it meaningful to include technology in the educational process? Both yes and no. It is meaningful, but only if this process is not disturbed. In the digital age of numbers and algorithms, everything tends toward ensuring oversight or control over the past, present, and future. This control is also attempted to be imposed on the educational process through various ways of presenting information, assessing understanding, and controlling progress. This not only causes tension between students, teachers, and content but also destroys the necessary resonance among them.

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38 *Ibid.*, 63–64.
39 *Ibid.*, 70.
40 *Ibid.*, 70–71.

ICT and AI in the Educational Process

All information and communication technologies (ICT) have historically been incorporated into the pedagogical process in various ways. Today, in the era of flourishing digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI), their integration into education is rapidly accelerating.[41] Experts hold differing views on this technological inclusion.

In modern societies, the media are not neutral transmitters of information but are increasingly becoming a crucial factor in shaping social reality. Fundamentally, media wield power, influence society, and generate tensions, especially due to their dependence on economics and politics.[42] Their power lies not only in reporting events but also in co-constructing meanings, shaping collective identities, and influencing social memory.[43] At the same time, media can act destructively, as they encourage polarization, distrust in institutions, and the breakdown of social bonds.[44] This dialectic between construction and destruction is a key starting point for analyzing the power of contemporary media.

Early discussions on technological neutrality, as formulated by David Sarnoff, asserted that technologies are neither inherently good nor bad, but their value depends on how they are used. However, today—in the age of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and attention economy—technologies are no longer neutral platforms but active devices of power and economy.[45] Technological systems select, filter, and distribute information based on pre-coded interests, meaning that the use of technology itself becomes ideologically and politically conditioned.[46]

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41 Sanja Jedrinović, "Smernice za uporabo orodij (generativne) umetne inteligence v izobraževanju," accessed Januar 28, 2025, https://www.uni-lj.si/studij/center-digitalna-ul/gradiva/ucni-pristopi-metode-in-oblike-dela/smernice-za-uporabo-orodij-generativne-umetne-inteligence-v-izobrazevanju.

42 Manuel Castells, *Comunicazione e Potere* (Milano: Università Bocconi Editore, 2009).

43 Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

44 Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006).

45 Shoshana Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza: il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, Seconda ed. (Roma: Luiss University Press, 2023).

46 Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10613531.

In the educational process, digital and social media are not merely tools or learning spaces but cultural products. Due to generational characteristics (devices are "young"), media are responsible for a gap in language, knowledge, and culture that threatens or at least complicates dialogue with adults. Rivoltella and Garavaglia especially emphasize the problem that schools are drifting too far from life, and the media deepen this gap even further.[47]

Among those favorable to integrating technology into education is Richard Mayer. He believes that using different media (visual and auditory) better focuses the presentation of content. When multiple channels present the same content, there is a dual advantage: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, more material can be presented through two channels than one—the content is presented twice. Qualitatively, two different presentations complement each other, even if they appear different externally. For example, an image can reinforce a verbal description. With the advent of computer technology, the ability to create presentations, animations, and videos has greatly expanded. Mayer identifies two perspectives on media integration in education: 1. technology-centered approaches and 2. learner-centered approaches.[48]

Technology-centered approaches do not lead to lasting improvements in education, unlike learner-centered approaches.[49] The latter can assist in automation—meaning that technology is used to replace humans in certain tasks—and in augmentation, which means using computers to enhance human performance on various cognitively complex tasks. However, it does not overlook the learner, which can happen in the first approach.[50]

A teacher who does not establish resonance in relation to the students and content might seek substitutes in ICT and AI. However, such a process dynamic will never guarantee the "event of subjectivity,"

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47 Andrea Garavaglia and Pier Cesare Rivoltella, "Insegnare e Apprendere Con Le Tecnologie," in *L'agire Didattico. Manuale per l'insegnante*, ed. Pier Cesare Rivoltella and Pier Giuseppe Rossi, 2nd ed. (Brescia: ELS La Scuola, 2017), 260.

48 Richard E. Mayer, *Multimedia Learning*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/9781316941355, 11–13.

49 Nežič Glavica, "'Pedagogika 3.0' ali oris edukacije v digitalni dobi," 1055–56.

50 Mayer, *Multimedia Learning*, 14.

which communicates to students that they are recognized, chosen, and unique.[51]

The following discussion focuses on AI in the educational process. However, it is clear from the above that all these tools are useful for individual learning, where a person deepens and complements their knowledge.

Diversity of AI Technologies in the Educational Process

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education refers to the use of computer systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as understanding language, adapting learning content, automating assessment, and supporting decision-making.[52] AI encompasses a wide range of technologies and methods that together enable the automation and enhancement of pedagogical processes.

In the educational context, AI includes various technological solutions such as AI assistants and intelligent tutoring systems. These "tutors" or assistants simulate the role of a teacher and offer personalized learning paths based on the needs of individual learners. They support different instructional models, including: the content model (what is taught), the pedagogical model (how it is taught), the learner-centered model (what the student knows), and the open model (insight into one's own progress). These systems aim to emulate human tutors by adapting the difficulty, sequencing, pace, and feedback during learning.[53]

Personalized Learning with the Help of ChatGPT

Samala and colleagues conducted an in-depth review of the advantages and disadvantages of ChatGPT in teaching and learning. They conclude that ChatGPT offers benefits such as the ability to provide

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51 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Boston: Hague, 1981), 66.

52 Stuart J. Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach. Fourth Edition* (San Diego: Pearson Education Limited, 2022).

53 Wayne Holmes, Maya Bialik and Charles Fadel, *Artificial Intelligence in Education: Promises and Implications for Teaching and Learning* (The Center for Curriculum Redesign, 2019), 31–34.

personalized and adaptive learning, immediate feedback, and improved accessibility.[54]

The personalization of learning content—adapting the pace and mode of instruction to the individual needs of the student—and the provision of real-time feedback can lead to greater engagement, deeper understanding, and higher academic achievement.[55]

Dilekli and Boyraz explored whether ChatGPT encourages students to think critically. They found that in the first essay assignment—where ChatGPT had access to publicly available sources—it performed as well as or better than students. However, in a second assignment, which required the use of two specific sources that were not freely accessible, the students outperformed ChatGPT. They conclude that expectations of ChatGPT should be limited when sources are not openly accessible and the model has to rely on secondary information. They also observed that the participants in their study felt little need to verify the accuracy of information provided by ChatGPT, indicating a high level of trust. This raises concerns that reliance on secondary sources may distort scientific evidence, promote plagiarism, and spread misinformation.[56] Duran's study similarly warns of users' low level of critical thinking when interacting with synthetic data generated by ChatGPT.

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54 Agariadne Samala, Xiaoming Zhai, Kumiko Aoki, Ljubisa Bojic, and Simona Zikic, "An In-Depth Review of ChatGPT's Pros and Cons for Learning and Teaching in Education," *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies (IJIM)* 18, no. 2 (2024): 96–117, https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v18i02.46509.

55 Lijia Chen, Pingping Chen and Zhijian Lin, "Artificial Intelligence in Education: A Review," *IEEE Access* 8 (2020): 75264–78, https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2020.2988510; Meltem Taşkın, "Artificial Intelligence in Personalized Education: Enhancing Learning Outcomes Through Adaptive Technologies and Data-Driven Insights," *Human Computer Interaction* 8, no. 1 (2025): 173, https://doi.org/10.62802/ygye0506; Tulasi T. Sri and Ahamed S. B. Inayath, "Artificial Intelligence Effects on Student Learning Outcomes in Higher Education," in *2024 Ninth International Conference on Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (ICONSTEM)* (Chennai, India: IEEE, 2024), 1–5, https://doi.org/10.1109/ICONSTEM60960.2024.10568868; Shribala and Jhaneswaran, "Impact of Artificial Intelligence in Education," *Shanlax International Journal of Management* 11 (2024): 8–11, https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v11iS1-Mar.7992; Nita Ambarita and Muh. Fiqri Nurrahmatullah, "Impacts of Artificial Intelligence on Student Learning: A Systematic Literature Review," *Jurnal VARIDIKA* 36, no. 1 (2024): 13–30, https://doi.org/10.23917/varidika.v36i1.4730; Coskun Alper, "Evaluating the Evaluators."

56 Yalcin Dilekli and Serkan Boyraz, "From 'Can AI Think?' To 'Can AI Help Thinking Deeper?': Is Use of Chat GPT in Higher Education a Tool of Transformation or Fraud?"

While ChatGPT has the potential to enhance educational efficiency and personalized learning, it simultaneously risks diminishing students' critical awareness.[57]

Positive Aspects of ChatGPT in Education

There are three fundamental positive features of ChatGPT in the educational process: support in content preparation, increased student engagement, and more efficient student assessment.

Support in content preparation. Teachers can use ChatGPT as an aid in creating various teaching materials, such as lesson plans, quizzes, and presentations. This support can significantly reduce preparation time and improve the organization of resources. It can also be an effective tool for helping students understand complex concepts through interactive dialogue and explanations.[58] ChatGPT also assists students in preparing presentations on various topics. With its help, they can write speeches or simulate interviews, which may enhance their confidence and public speaking skills.[59]

Increased student engagement. The interactive nature of ChatGPT, with engaging dialogues and activities, can stimulate students' interest. Due to this interactivity, learning becomes not only more enjoyable but also promotes active student participation. The use of ChatGPT can increase student engagement through debates or critical thinking exercises.[60] Korean researcher Lee finds that in their Catholic education system, ChatGPT could help alleviate the workload of pastoral

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International Journal of Modern Education Studies 8, no. 1 (2024):4 9–71, https://doi.org/10.51383/ijonmes.2024.316.

57 Volkan Duran, "Analyzing Teacher Candidates' Arguments on AI Integration in Education via Different Chatbots," *Digital Education Review* 45, (2024), 68–83, https://doi.org/10.1344/der.2024.45.68-83.

58 Gewirtz, David, "How to Make ChatGPT Provide Sources and Citations," *Zdnet*, June 28, 2024, https://www.zdnet.com/article/how-to-make-chatgpt-provide-sources-and-citations/.

59 Talkative, "ChatGPT-4o vs GPT-4 vs GPT-3.5: What's the Difference?," accessed June 3, 2024, https://gettalkative.com/info/gpt-models-compared.

60 Adam Fard, "How to Use ChatGPT-4: A Comprehensive Guide," accessed January 9, 2025, https://adamfard.com/blog/how-to-use-chatgpt-4.

workers and teachers, enhance individualized religious education, and assist in incorporating numerous English texts that are not available in Korean.[61]

More effective student assessment. AI significantly contributes to educational processes, as it has the potential to increase efficiency, productivity, and personalized learning experiences. AI technologies can improve assessment mechanisms and feedback delivery, thus enhancing student learning outcomes. AI-based assessment systems offer accurate and consistent feedback, saving teachers time and increasing the effectiveness of the assessment process. Human grading can vary due to personal preferences, experience, and individual judgment, leading to inconsistency in assessments and feedback. Especially in large classrooms, the time and effort required for manual grading can hinder the delivery of timely and consistent feedback to students. The use of AI in analyzing learning materials and grading can increase the accuracy and objectivity of the process, thereby reducing bias and subjectivity.

Coskun and Alper examined the consistency and discrepancies between the grades assigned by teachers and those generated by AI tools across various exam formats: traditional tests, quizzes, project work, videos, and posters. They were interested in the level of agreement between the sets of grades. The Bland-Altman and ICC tests revealed a moderate to high level of agreement. They found the highest consistency in image-based assessments and the greatest discrepancies in video assessments. They conclude that AI can, in many cases, evaluate more successfully and efficiently, but it cannot replace human evaluators for complex tasks.[62]

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[61] Soo Lee, "The Nature of Faith Education Amidst the Generative AI Craze," *ACTS Theological Journal* 61, (2024):237–76, https://doi.org/10.19114/atj.61.7.

[62] Coskun and Alper, "Evaluating the Evaluators," 124–39.

Negative Aspects of ChatGPT in the Educational Process

The implications of AI—and thereby ChatGPT—include issues of accuracy, adherence to research methodology, and dependence on technology.

Issues with accuracy. One of the immediate consequences is the problem of accuracy, as ChatGPT-4 still makes errors or produces so-called "hallucinations." This includes the issue of citing incorrect or fabricated sources.[63]

One major concern is the reliability of the information generated by ChatGPT-4. Instances of incorrect or "hallucinated" data may mislead students and undermine their trust in educational resources.

Adherence to research methodology. There is a legitimate concern that students might misuse AI for plagiarism or cheating, which jeopardizes academic integrity and the value of education.[64] The ease of access to information provided by ChatGPT-4 raises concerns about academic honesty. Students may abuse this technology for plagiarism or may not engage properly with research methodologies. The use of ChatGPT also raises ethical questions, especially regarding student data privacy and transparency in the use of AI tools. It is essential to establish clear guidelines on how data is used and stored.[65]

Risk of dependence on technology. There is also the issue of excessive reliance on AI tools, which may reduce the students' ability to think independently, solve problems logically, and develop critical thinking skills.[66]

Furthermore, there are concerns about bias and the high cost of such tools. AI can also reduce the focus on the emotional, social, and cultural aspects of teaching and learning. Although AI promotes academic performance and student engagement, helps overcome time constraints,

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63 Gewirtz, "How to Make ChatGPT Provide Sources and Citations."

64 Waalaxy, "How Can ChatGPT Find Reliable Sources?," accessed March 7, 2024, https://blog.waalaxy.com/en/chatgpt-reliable-sources/.

65 Fard, "How to Use ChatGPT-4."

66 Talkative, "ChatGPT-4o vs GPT-4 vs GPT-3.5."

and supports shy students in participating more easily, it may simultaneously diminish these human dimensions.[67]

Conclusion

Teaching involves the processes of individualization, differentiation, and personalization. Individualization refers to adapting the pace of instruction to the individual student. Differentiation involves adapting the teaching approach. Personalization means tailoring education according to the student's interests and experiences.[68] Personalization is the adaptation of learning and teaching based on the comparison between current and desired knowledge.[69]

Throughout this discussion, we have found that ICT tools and AI can be effective in the process of personalization. In other words, when a student needs to act independently—without communication with others—to complete a task, practice, research, or learn, these systems can be effective. However, when it comes to differentiation and individualization, we have not identified AI as a suitable tool.

Regarding the first research question—the role communication plays in the educational process—the findings of this study support the conclusion that comprehensive communication and a resonant relationship between teacher, student, and content are essential for the learning process. This process is inherently risky, as it has to allow for open freedom of decision-making and responsibility. The student must be granted the possibility for a "subjectivity event" to occur—an experience where they feel called, addressed, and chosen; where they perceive their own uniqueness as both irreplaceable and a responsibility. Technology cannot achieve this in a human way, nor will it ever be able to.

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67 Julien, "How Artificial Intelligence (AI) Impacts Inclusive Education," 95–103.

68 Hooper and Rieber, "Teaching with Technology," in *Teaching: Theory into Practice 2013*, ed. Allan C. Ornstein (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 154–70.

69 Natalija Komljanc, "Formativno spremljanje učenja," in *Didaktika ocenjevanja znanja: vodenje procesa ocenjevanja za spodbujanje razvoja učenja*, *Zbornik 2. mednarodnega posveta v Celju* (Ljubljana: Zavod RS za šolstvo, 2009), 8–17.

In response to the second research question—whether appropriately integrated AI in the educational process can provide better results while preserving the human aspect of education—we arrived at the following insights: in this study, we have outlined both positive and negative effects of AI in education. The integration of ICT and AI in education is only beneficial when human teachers cannot intervene due to limitations of space (not only in schools, but everywhere), time (not only during live classes, but at any time), or the number of students (communication with all learners).

The use of ICT and AI tools is useful when students are not left entirely to themselves, when the goal is to carefully nurture the talents of each learner, and when it is necessary to enable the learning process in situations where a teacher physically cannot be present. However, these tools cannot replace the teacher.

Our discussion also highlights the need for teacher training and the issue of accessibility to AI tools. To implement ChatGPT-4 effectively in classrooms, professional development programs are necessary to equip teachers with the skills required to use these technologies effectively. Teachers must be trained to integrate these tools in a way that enriches the learning experience.

Another key challenge is ensuring equal access to AI tools. Disparities in technological access among students could further exacerbate existing educational inequalities. Ensuring access to these technologies for all students is essential to avoid disparities in educational opportunities.[70]

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[70] Gewirtz, "How to Make ChatGPT Provide Sources and Citations."

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ONLINE SALAFISM – THE TENSION TO (CO)EXIST IN RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL PLURALITY

Anja Zalta

Introduction[1]

In the age of social networks and digitalization, we are experiencing accelerated development in the globalization of religious ideas, one of the causes and consequences of which is the de-traditionalization of local religious characteristics. Parallel to this process, we can observe an ignorance and non-recognition of religious heterogeneity and diversification in the broader social reality within traditional religious world systems and an ignorance of the particularities of new religious transformations and mutations created by new technologies. More than two decades ago, the English sociologist Grace Davie problematized the idea of how the religious message is changing with the advent of information and communication technologies. She pointed out that the transmission of religious messages via various social networks and media reaches a much larger number of people than in physical form, but is perceived differently by the religious community. Religious memory is consolidated with the help of these different technologies, but at the

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same time, it also changes as religious messages are customized to the respective medium.[2]

The fact is that information and communication technologies have had a significant impact on changing the religious practices of individuals in recent decades, as many people, especially the younger generation, do not distinguish between *offline* and *online* life, since they combine both and see this as the basis of their social existence.[3] It is these younger generations, especially Generation Z (Gen Z, people born between 1997 and 2012), that we will focus on in this article.

It is perhaps good at the outset to distinguish between *religion online* and *online religion*, which is helpful when looking at different religious practices in the digital sphere.[4] The former concerns websites created to preserve the traditional authority of an already institutionalized religion. The information on these websites is conveyed according to doctrine, and with the help of the Internet, religious content is now available to a wide range of users anytime, anywhere. Unlike *religion online*, *online religion* creates a platform where individuals can express their opinions, communicate with each other, share their religious experiences, and even perform rituals together. *Online religion* therefore represents or establishes the Internet as a new way or medium in modern society.

The Internet represents "a highly competitive market,"[5] which reaches a much broader audience, including in terms of religious production and offering. In the age of digitalization and because of the emergence of new media cultures, that is why we must not ignore the fact that one of the reasons for the transformation of the physical form of religious dissemination toward digitalization is certainly competition. In that

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2 Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3 Heidi A. Campbell, "The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion," in Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203084861; Christopher Helland, "Ritual," in Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, edited by Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013).

4 Helland, "Ritual."

5 Marcel Klapp, "'That's Where I Get Reach!': Marketing Strategies of a Salafi Influencer on YouTube and TikTok," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 18 (2024): 12, https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-bja10089.

way, individual online users choose their religious beliefs and practices according to what is on offer, from traditional, already institutionalized religions to new religious movements and modern spiritual trends. On the other hand, there is an opportunity for religious providers that offer traditional religious institutions and specializations, as well as religious innovations or interpretations of traditional religious models and ideas. One such example is the offering of online Salafism.

A particular contribution of this paper is to highlight the key factors that different Muslim communities in Europe, as well as European society more broadly, need to address in order to engage younger generations through the use of new technologies and to consider the changes in religious memory and the challenges these changes entail. This article refers to some of the existing materials on online Salafism in Europe. We have also examined publications on online Salafism in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The analysis results from synthesizing the collected data with doctrinal content, using a socio-cultural methodological approach. This contributes to understanding the social challenges of moral and religious diversity and provides a basis for reflecting on how to design platforms for inclusive citizenship and creative coexistence. Such platforms can serve as a foundation for good practices and policies to regulate a morally and religiously plural society.

The Diversity of Salafism and its Entry into the Digital Sphere

Since Salafism is a complex phenomenon and it is difficult to reach a consensus on what the term itself means, we will first define the term as we understand it and as we will use it in our work. We will then show why it is important to consider this kind of issue in the light of religious changes and tensions with the wider European society. We will also draw attention to the tensions that digital Salafist platforms also bring to traditional Muslim communities in Europe, on the one hand, and to understanding their critique of secular regimes and liberal democracy on the other. We will review some of the important theories and research that have analyzed this topic in recent years and point to the content that confirms our thesis.

Online religious communities are a key to analyzing the transfer of religion into the digital sphere. These are interactive communities that promote two-way communication through various forms of information and communication technologies, such as chat rooms ("chat corners") and comments under online postings. The aim of these rooms is to ask questions and find answers on religious topics. The online religious community also plays an important role as an identity network, giving users a sense of shared identity and uniting them in a particular religious tradition.[6] In this sense, the Internet is becoming a key medium for maintaining a common religious identity, and Salafism has also found its niche in the digital sphere. Research into the discursive techniques used by Salafi preachers and/or Salafi influencers on social networks is very popular, particularly with regard to understanding the re-traditionalization and radicalization of religious thought. The research on this topic, which we will discuss in this article, is mainly concerned with their strategies and practices.

Since digitalization enables a global presence without physical contact, the traditionally defined physical boundaries of individual religious schools and practices are losing their validity for many. This is particularly true for younger generations, who participate in religious teachings online regardless of their geographical location and/or traditional affiliation with a particular religious school. In the search for meaning and belonging, the supplementing or shaping of religious truths results in ambiguous identities among younger generations of Muslims in Europe and beyond. Salafist opinion makers know how to utilize the Internet effectively.

In recent years, numerous interdisciplinary research studies and publications have appeared on the topic of Salafist online activists, focusing primarily on the role of the Internet in radicalization to jihadism or examining the representations of non-jihadist Salafist groups, individual preachers and social networks, digital media and online forums.

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[6] Asep Muhamad Iqbal, "When Religion Meets the Internet: Cyber-Religion and the Secularization Thesis," *Jurnal Komunikasi Islam* 6, no. 1 (2016): 19, https://doi.org/10.15642/jki.2016.6.1.1-28.

Of course, the interpretation of Salafist online activities also requires a precise knowledge of the dynamics, cultural contexts, and particularities in order to avoid falling into generalizations that lead to simplistic prejudices about Islam and Muslims and the potential conflicts that extremists and radical politicians harbor. However, it is right to take a critical look at certain forms of Salafism that develop a similar dynamic and seek to create sharp tensions with the wider society, in our case that of Europe.

In order to avoid these generalizations, it is necessary to explain the concept of Salafism itself, which is extremely complex and whose use and application depend on the contexts and interpretations. Very different movements are summarized under this common label, from apolitical religious movements to reformist political and activist, even violent movements.

Salaf, Salafis and Salafism

The word *salaf* itself means "to follow" – "to go before." *Al-salaf-al-salih* were the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, the orthodox founders of the religion, and the term itself encompasses the first three generations of Muslims.

The first Salafis (*al-salaf-al-salih*) developed a method (*manhaj*) to help them in their search for religious truth. We know that the Islamic tradition does not draw from a single source, namely the Qur'an (the book of revelation in which, according to Muslim belief, the angel Jibril (Gabriel) conveyed the word of God to the Prophet), but also from the Sunnah (the practices of the Prophet), the Hadith (the oral traditions attributed to the Prophet), the Fiqh (the jurisprudence) or Madahib (the schools of law), and the Sharia or code of law that governs various aspects of Muslim life.[7] Although these "sources" have contributed to

[7] In this paper, we try to distinguish between the so-called Islamic identity, which is a field of theology that focuses on the foundations of Islam with an emphasis on the primary sources of the faith, such as Islamic law, theology, philosophy, Islamic education, or the interpretation of the Koran. The specific forms and expressions of Muslim identity can be understood on the basis of the cultural, social and political background of Muslims and the transformation of religious thought into different socio-cultural environments in different periods of history.

the emergence of the so-called "Islamic traditions," they are not equally important. Of all the sources, the most important is undoubtedly the Qur'an, which Muslims regard as the first, most authoritative source of normative Islam, which of course also applies to the ideological construction of the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf-al-salih*).

This is also what the Salafist movements advocate today. The central point of reference is God and the Qur'an, and the desire of modern Salafists is to return to the original or so-called authentic Islam. As a result of this search for authenticity, Salafism today represents a movement within Sunni Islam that is extremely exclusivist and internally stratified. Salafists share with other Muslims the recognition of the Qur'an as divine revelation and Muhammad as the last prophet of God, but they generally reject development and change – be it theological, doctrinal, institutional, or ritual, which of course leads to many paradoxical situations in the modern world, such as the use of modern technologies and social networks to spread their influence, which seems to contradict the original idea of returning to the time and space of the first Muslim communities. But of course, things are not that simple.

As Stemmann points out, the modern Salafist movements entered the political arena as part of a project to revitalize Muslim thought based on the authors Jamal al-Din al-Afgani and Muhammad Abdo, who were impressed by the progress of the West at the end of the 19th century. They wanted to renew Islam on the basis of the modernization and rationalization of Muslim thought, while at the same time reviving the practices of the first Muslims and the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. This movement coexisted with a minority sect that followed the teachings of Saudi Arabia's Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and adopted the concept of Salafism, and the reformist Salafism of Afghani and Abdo gradually transformed into a nationalist movement.[8]

Salafism thus formed the ideological foundation of Saudi Arabia and spread the Salafist ideology throughout the Muslim world, partly thanks to the strong financial support of the royal court. Financial donations

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[8] Juan J. Escobar Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence and Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2006): 2, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_sept06/meria_sept06_a.pdf.

are used to finance the construction of mosques, pay religious employees, fund translations of important Salafi theologians and ideologues, provide scholarships for students of Islamic sciences, etc.[9]

The gap between reformist and academic Salafism and militant or "jihadi" Salafism, which emerged during the Gulf War when Saudi Arabia cooperated with the US on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, leading to the radicalization of many Salafists, who until then had represented an apolitical pietism, is important for our understanding of the dynamics within the Salafist movements.[10] This radicalization emphasizes the fight against unbelievers (*kafir*) as a religious duty, and the concept of *takfir* (calling someone an unbeliever) becomes a source of conflict between Salafis and a model for the search for the "other," not only outside but also within the Muslim community.[11] This leads to tensions and friction among Muslims themselves, as *takfir* becomes an instrument with which any regime, including a Muslim one, can be fought. Later in the paper, we will relate this concept to the potential tensions that arise between Salafi movements and the wider European society.

Quintan Wiktorowicz offers a three-part stratification of Salafist movements. He identifies Salafists who are exclusively concerned with the transmission of religious teachings and avoid political activities on the one hand, and political activists and jihadists who legitimize the use of violence and violent means to achieve their goals on the other.[12]

Classifications may vary, but the purpose is to point out that there are different approaches that indicate heterogeneity in the understanding and interpretations of Salafi thought, so it is very important to analyze the individual cases in the context of socio-cultural, political and historical and theological relations. Salafism is not a monolithic category, and although Salafism is only a minority phenomenon among European Muslims, it has a major influence on various Muslim

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9 Peter Mandaville, *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

10 Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin Books, 2016); Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence,"2, also Olivier Roy, *L'Islamisme radical* (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

11 *Ibid.*, 2

12 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004.

communities in Europe and is increasingly appealing to young people as it represents a strong religious alternative.

The Appeal of Online Salafism for Younger Generations

According to Stemmann, Salafism in Europe appeals to that part of the population that has been bypassed by the reform-oriented Muslim movements in Europe. One such reform movement is the *Tabligh* movement, for example, which preached a sophisticated form of orthodoxy where the key was distance from non-orthodox society, visiting poor neighborhoods, appealing to migrant workers who had no cultural access to European society, etc. However, they did not succeed in adapting to the generations of young Muslims educated in Europe.[13]

Young Muslims in Europe often have problems finding their identity, as it is shaped by various directions, guidelines, and models that question traditional authorities and come into conflict with their dogmatic framework. It is obvious that the old traditional models of religious teachings and practices are not sufficient for the younger generations, nor is the method and transmission of knowledge, because it is the youth, especially Generation Z (Gen Z), whose social and political life is characterized by social networks. As already mentioned, in recent years, the innovative digital platforms of Salafi ideologues have provided new opportunities for communication with a virtual audience, leading to the formation of what Abdulmajid calls an "online religious-doctrinal ecosystem."[14]

A 2021 survey by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that the largest Salafist online accounts in English and Arabic have audiences in the tens of millions, "with cumulative cross-platform followings of 117 million and 109 million, respectively."[15]

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13 Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence," 6.

14 Adib Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media: Analytical Study of the Discourse of Neo-Salafi Preacher," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 6, no. 2 (2023): 178, https://doi.org/10.14421/lijid.v6i2.4489.

15 Milo Comerford, Ayad Moustafa, and Jakob Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem: Executive Summary* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021), accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Executive-summary.pdf.

Last year (2024), the Institute for Strategic Development (ISD) analyzed a wide range of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, and a number of standard websites in Arabic, English, and German. They recorded around 3.5 million posts on almost 1,500 networks and accounts and gained a comprehensive insight into what they call "the digital Salafi ecosystem" and the way it works. According to their data, Salafi profiles in English and Arabic have several million followers, with a total of 117 million international followers for Arabic profiles and 109 million for English profiles. Profiles in German have around 3 million followers. When investigating the servers, they found that six Discord servers alone have almost 5,000 accounts (member accounts), which function as "closed groups in which activists can discuss theology, coordinate attacks on other servers and open new accounts on other social networks."[16]

According to the MENA Research Center, the number of posts in Salafist online communities doubled between October 2019 and July 2021, an increase of 112 per cent. In German-speaking countries, the increase is 77 per cent.[17] According to their data, Salafist online forums are extremely successful in appealing to young people (Gen Z), which comprises around 1.2 billion people under the age of 30.

So what is it that appeals to young Muslim seekers that traditional institutionalized religious authorities can't answer or don't know?

It is typical for Salafists to network informally and globally or transnationally. According to Pall and De Koning, the informal nature of Salafi activism is important in order to understand why the global Salafi message has met with such a massive and positive response in different local contexts and has developed into a global trend involving preachers, scholars and laypeople whose aim is to revitalize Islam based on a utopian vision of the way of life and work of the first generation of Muslims.[18] It is this utopian version that clearly calls on young Muslims

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[16] Comerford, Moustafa and Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem*.

[17] MENA Research Center, "Online Salafists in Europe on the Rise," October 19, 2022, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.mena-researchcenter.org/online-salafists-in-europe-on-the-rise/.

[18] Zoltan Pall and Martin de Koning, "Being and Belonging in Transnational Salafism: Informality, Social Capital and Authority in European and Middle Eastern Salafi Networks," *Journal*

to look for alternatives in order to face modern society and its challenges. When we speak of challenges, we do not only mean confronting the permissive behaviors that Salafi preachers know how to exploit (the issue of LGBTQ rights, sexual permissiveness, alcohol consumption, etc.), but also the negative consequences of social problems caused by racism, discrimination, Islamophobia, etc. A young European Muslim with roots in the Middle East, North Africa, or Central Asia, for example, finds himself/herself in a crisis of belonging and forms a kind of hybrid identity, as he/she is no longer "connected to the cultural environment of his parents or grandparents."[19] And this, of course, is the appropriate niche for the Salafists' altered interpretation of sacred texts, teachings, and practices, as well as their applications and interpretations of utopian Muslim society.

In his study of Salafist influencers on social media, Adib Abdulmajid highlights certain factors that favor the popularity of Salafist preachers. These include poor access to education, especially Islamic knowledge on practical and theoretical religious issues. The lack of this knowledge leads to frustration and allows seekers to cling to ideological advice, opinions, and instructions.[20] Those who do not receive answers to important theological and practical questions from their religion are forced to search the Internet. The problem is not only that there are no satisfactory answers offered by local religious experts in the field. Bad European policies are adding to the tension, as in the case of the headscarf affair in France, which led to discrimination against young Muslim girls who were not allowed to attend public schools because of their headscarves. Many of these young Muslim girls have chosen to attend religious schools that are not recognized (accredited) by the state, which means that the education they receive is not valid on the labor market. With such and similar ill-conceived measures and consequences, parallel systems of study or education are created that offer greater or lesser tensions with society in general, are ignorant of European democratization processes and are not in favor of ideological and religious

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of Muslims in Europe 6, no. 1 (2017): 77, https://doi.org/ 10.1163/22117954-12341338.

19 Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 79.

20 Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media," 178.

pluralism. Of course, this is also carefully utilized by Salafist influencers on the Internet for their recruitment.

The Problem of Salafist Influencers and the Emergence of Tensions with the Wider Society

According to Tariq Ramadan, European Muslims experiencing a new society have no choice but to go back to the beginning and study the foundations of their religious tradition in order to delineate and distinguish between what is immutable (*thabit*) and what is mutable (*mutaghayyirat*) in their religion to facilitate reflection on the possible adaptation to the new society.[21] The search for the roots of the first Muslim communities on the basis of applied methods and new technologies is also skillfully exploited by Salafist influencers, and often leads to social tensions both in the Muslim communities themselves and in European society as a whole.

Salafists use a wide range of formats to informally engage with different groups through various platforms, broadcasts, preaching channels and informational videos that offer answers to questions of doctrine and prescriptions on the correct or ethical way of life, including the question of attitudes toward the public, questions on gender roles, family propriety, eating habits, dress, education, social interaction, child rearing, etc. In the following, we will point out their dualistic schemata of the clean-dirty, right-wrong type, as well as the usual Salafi opposition to the Islamic establishment, which is also of particular importance because it leads to tensions and division with other Muslim communities. In this context, it is worth mentioning the concept of *hākimīyā* (the question of God's rule of sovereignty), by which they only recognize the sovereignty of God at the political level and not that of nation-states.[22] Pall and De Koning cite as the main reason why Salafists rely almost exclusively on informal connections the fact that Salafist preachers view

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[21] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 145, see also: Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2011).

[22] Abdulmajid, "Salafi-Influencers on Social Media," 187.

formal institutions as often causing divisions among Muslims, while Islam strives to unite Muslims into one body.[23] Salafism regards formal religious institutions as harmful religious innovations *(bida*) that did not exist at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the first Muslims and therefore lead Muslims astray from the right path. They are then loyal to their organizations and not to God. Salafists, therefore, feel called to be the unifying transnational and global phenomenon that will unite all Muslims into a single unified Ummah. At the same time, they selectively pick out the apostate Muslims, and also problematize the nationalization of mosques and Muslim cultural centers, etc.

The aim of Salafi influencers is to present themselves as connoisseurs of true Islam, as role models who are close to the *Salaf* and therefore have a legitimate authority to interpret religious truths and rules. Salafi influencers on the Internet use various concepts that reveal the basic tenets of Salafi doctrine and that are linked to the fundamental sources of the Islamic religion, though they have developed their methodology, which deals with key doctrinal issues, in a peculiar way, in a kind of neo-Salafi style. What does this mean? The methodology is still based on the fundamental Islamic concepts of the early Muslim community, such as *tawhid* or the belief in the oneness and unity of God, and *bida* (invitation to believe), but the key concepts of the Islamic religion can be radicalized under certain Salafist interpretations to such an extent that they pose challenges to peaceful and creative coexistence with the wider society and can also be levers for violent action. There are certainly concepts that require caution and sensitivity in interpretation, particularly *kufr* (disbelief) and *tughyān* (idolatry). According to the MENA Research Center, the identification of and incitement against non-Muslim believers, such as Jews and Christians, takes place in the English and German-speaking Salafi communities. Among Arabic-language posts, however, Salafi forums focus on the search for Shiites and Sufis.[24]

Actual or perceived anti-Muslim incidents and debates (e.g. about banning headscarves) are used for this purpose and polarize or serve to

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[23] Pall and De Koning, "Being and Belonging in Transnational Salafism," 83.
[24] MENA Research Center, "Online Salafists in Europe on the Rise."

create greater tensions with the environment and the wider European society. It is about the problem of the religious illiteracy of the general public,[25] which generates Islamophobic discourse, and, on the other hand, the political illiteracy of many young Muslims who, due to the hybridity of their identities, search for solid charismatic personalities to show them how to deal with the "problematic nature" of European society (secularization, modernization, pluralization, Western liberalism, etc.). The adjustment difficulties of young European Muslims of Generation Z, who have been passed over by traditional madrassas or who are not addressed by traditional preachers who are unfamiliar with the dynamics of European society and culture, lead them to seek their role models on the Internet – and the newly emerging Salafi influencers know how to address the grievances of young European Muslims with populism and instant answers, but with enough charisma to be followed by the masses.

To avoid generalizations and simplistic interpretations, it is necessary to again address the split between reformists and militant Salafists that we have mentioned above. While reformist Salafism rejects violence, it still preaches a version of Islam that favors a complete break with "unholy Europe."[26] Both Salafist political activists and jihadists use social networks, especially YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, to recruit young people for their religious and ideological beliefs. The organization Kicksafe notes that Salafism draws on elements of pop culture to reach young people, using videos as a basic propaganda tool and even designing computer games (one such extreme jihadist form of computer video game involves beheading the enemy).

It is perhaps interesting to mention the example of the specific Salafi subculture called the "Islamogram" community, which is also considered extreme (radical) digital Salafism. It has more than 160,000 members and borrows from the culture of the extreme right, propagating the "Aryan interpretation of Islam" and creating a kind of neo-Nazi Salafist community, and Salafist jihadists adapt the language and aesthetics of

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[25] By the term "religious illiteracy," we mean the ignorance of diversities and dynamics within Muslim societies.

[26] Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism's Influence," 6–7.

neo-Nazis, including the fact that they call themselves national socialist Salafists. The "Islamogram" often attack liberal Muslims and democracy, LGBTQ+ and gender rights, is against feminism, and euphemistic concepts such as "cultural Marxism," "wokism," etc.[27] On the other hand, recent ISD research has shown how extreme white nationalists have adopted jihadist tactics such as fiqh al-dima (jurisprudence of blood).[28] It is more than obvious that this is a mutation of the memory and complete religious and political illiteracy of the new generations, who selectively choose their political and identity factors and combine them according to the modern "pick and mix" method, thus creating a religious bricolage identity that is paradoxically in complete ideological and religious opposition to the Muslims of the first generations (*al-salaf-al-salih*).[29]

To counter Salafist propaganda on the Internet, the Kicksafe organization has produced the brochure "Salafism on the Internet, Recognizing Propaganda Strategies – Escaping Manipulation," which is available online through open access.[30] This kind of approaches and tools are more than welcome, since Salafist influencers use clear black and white strategies, and value systems based on clear rules and commandments that have to be followed unconditionally; they advocate the consolidation of group identity and cohesion, but at the same time they are very harsh toward Islamic orthodoxy, the traditional models of transmission of religious knowledge and practices advocated by the

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27 Comerford, Moustafa and Guhl, *Gen-Z & the Digital Salafi Ecosystem*.

28 *Ibid*., see also: Pia Müller, Stefan Harrendorf, and Antonia Mischler, "Linguistic Radicalisation of Right-Wing and Salafi Jihadist Groups in Social Media: A Corpus-Driven Lexicometric Analysis," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 28 (2022): 203–244, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-022-09509-7; Ineke Roes, "Should We Be Scared of All Salafists in Europe? A Dutch Case Study," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (June 2014): 51–63, and Liselotte Weiten and Tahir Abbas, *Critical Perspectives on Salafism in the Netherlands* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)), April 2021.

29 Such ideological overlaps recently occurred with online influencer Andrew Tate, who converted to Islam due to his admiration for certain forms of conservative, patriarchal religious practice.

30 Klicksafe, Salafist propaganda online, accesed April 23, 2025, https://www.klicksafe.eu/en/salafismus; see also: Aida Kassaye and Anja van Heelsum, "Muslim Organisations' Response to Stigmatisation in the Media," *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 9, no. 1 (2020): 96–118, https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-BJA10001.

religious establishment, and of course toward secularization, laicization, pluralization and other processes that European societies are facing. Whether and to what extent Salafi ideology can or wishes to join the casual consensus of all the social actors in European society is what we will try to answer below.

Salafist Influencers and the Social Challenges of Moral and Religious Diversity

What John Rawls calls "the fact of rational pluralism" is based on the realization that rationality has its limits in deciding issues of ultimate importance, though the so-called "overlapping consensus" on fundamental public values is a precondition for the existence of pluralistic societies.[31] The challenge for these modern pluralist societies, however, is to ensure that everyone can perceive the basic principles of the political community as legitimate. If this does not happen, we have parallel systems in religiously and ethnically plural societies that are in tension with each other (e.g. Salafists and their interpretation of European secular society, and the need for the implementation of the Sharia (code of law) to govern various aspects of Muslim life with no separation between private and public in terms of religious presentations). Regulating moral and religious diversity is therefore one of the most important challenges facing modern societies, and "laicization" is an essential component of a liberal democracy.

According to MacLure and Taylor, laicization is based on two major principles, equality of respect and freedom of conscience, as well as on two operational methods that enable the realization of these principles: the separation of church and state and the neutrality of the state toward religions.[32] The authors make a clear distinction between laicization and secularization. According to them, laicization is a process by which the state affirms its independence from religion, and one of the

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[31] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 4.

[32] Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Laïcité et liberté de conscience* (Montreal: Éditions du Boréal, 2010).

components of secularization is the decline of the influence of religion on social practices and behavior in the life of the individual.[33]

However, the concepts that deal with the degree of separation of religion and state in Europe are very heterogeneous. With very different definitions of secularism and various theories of secularization, as well as historical and political backgrounds, we need to consider historical factors that have shaped the understanding, interpretation and practical implementation of a concept of the separation of "religion and state" in a particular time and space. Above all, we need to trace the application and dissemination of these concepts in practice, so that we do not maintain the interpretations of the concepts without analyzing their impact on social reality. According to Kerševan, the secularization of the state and state power is related, on the one hand, to the independence of absolutist rulers from the church and, on the other, to the requirement—arising from the Protestant Reformation—that state power be autonomous from the church. If there are several recognized religions in the country, then the state, law, and morality (at least in terms of fundamental questions) must be independent of any religion, because only then are they acceptable to all citizens.[34] Hashemi asks, for example, whether "secularism means anti-clericalism, atheism, deconstruction, state neutrality and equal distance from all religions, the rejection of religious symbols in the public sphere, the separation of public and private spheres, the complete separation of religion and politics, or a closer separation of state institutions from the influence of religion."[35] Secularism in Europe is usually measured and evaluated in comparison to the two most prominent models of the Western tradition: the French model, which is relatively hostile to religion, and the American model, which is relatively friendly to religion. Complementing what has just been said, Cesari defines secularism as the various Western political cultures that contextualize and historicize the two main principles of secularism: the protection of law for all religions and equidistance between

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33 *Ibid*.

34 Marko Kerševan, *Sociologija – Marksizem – Sociologija religije* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2011), 81.

35 Nader S. Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

state and religion. These two principles are constantly interpreted within specific political cultures that ultimately shape the societal expectations of the role of religion in the public sphere and in society.[36]

In the case of Europe, these expectations are above all (but not always) the separation of church and state and the privatization of religion. It is true that this Western experience is at the heart of most theories of secularization that refer to Western countries. But, although secularism has "Christian roots," as Charles Taylor writes, "it is a mistake to think that this limits the application of its formula to post-Christian societies."[37] It is therefore necessary to find alternative models and to take into account the religious experiences and processes of individual countries and societies. Each country can develop its own model, according to its interests and needs (priorities and norms), but with the awareness that it does not bow to "cultural relativism" when it comes to respect for human rights and religious pluralism (among other things). When we address the issue of Salafism in Europe, we are often confronted with interpretations of Islam as an alternative to secular politics. The idea of the "secularization" of Islam is often understood as a reformation of Islam. It seems that Islam is incompatible with secularization and democracy unless it undergoes fundamental theological reforms. According to Oliver Roy, such an understanding ignores the fact that Catholicism has never undergone a fundamental theological reformation (which would mean the "triumph of Protestantism"), but has nevertheless been able to adapt to modernity.[38] In Europe, we encounter various Salafi tendencies that oppose any kind of change and adaptation. They also often embody a dualistic (de)-vision, live in a parallel existence and have no need for social interaction with the broader societies, including with the majority of Muslims in Europe, who find what is mutable (*mutaghayyirat*) in their religion to facilitate adaptation and creative coexistence with others.

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[36] Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3–14.

[37] Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

[38] Olivier Roy, "Islam in the West or Western Islam? The Disconnect of Religion and Culture," *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1–2 (2006): 129.

Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Salafism represents global Islam with its norms that erase cultural identity specificities and appeal to younger generations of Muslims. It does not use the same methodology for putting religious teachings into practice as traditional religious institutions and authorities. Indeed, Salafism challenges traditional authorities and traditional ways of disseminating religious knowledge and has replaced traditional mosques and religious schools with digital platforms due to its integration into the digital reality and the hybridity of its identity. Salafist religious influencers proclaim clear and unambiguous messages calling for a return to the original Islam, including reading and implementing the true sources of Islam and respecting the true tradition. They derive their charisma from the belief that they are in possession of the original Islamic knowledge, and due to the limited religious education of the younger generations (we have mentioned Gen Z), they are the most convenient reference as they use online networks and digital platforms. The rhetoric of Salafi preachers is aligned with the key questions posed by young people's hybrid identity, and their answers and examples of how to live as a true Muslim are accessible anytime and anywhere.

In the global community (ummahs), they offer new or fresher (refreshed) religious products to the new generations with the help of new technologies, which are alien or avoided by traditional authorities. In this environment, a broad spectrum of different groups inspired by Salafism has formed – from apolitical scholars to online activists and violent extremists. They have a monopoly on the online networks that the traditional religious establishment cannot achieve, or at least not to the same extent.

In this context, political and activist Salafism present a wide range of ideas, one of which is to offer an alternative to the secular state. The central problem for them continues to be the question of Islamic law in Europe. Conflicts such as the question of the introduction of Sharia law naturally seem insurmountable and defend the thesis of the "clash of civilisations." Therefore, it is equally important to be aware of the conflicts within the European Muslim societies caused by the challenges, social standards, and conditions of living in Europe. It is therefore

crucial to understand the heterogeneity and plurality of (among others) Muslim societies in Europe, with an emphasis on the distinction between different Salafi branches and their worldviews.

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TECHNOLOGICAL SALVATION: NEURALINK'S CAMPAIGN THROUGH THE LENS OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

Stjepan Štivić

Introduction[1]

Neuralink is a company founded by Elon Musk aimed at developing brain-computer interface (BCI) technology, and it has sparked significant interest and controversy in both scientific and public circles. Neuralink presents its BCI technology as a revolutionary medical advancement, claiming that it can restore physical abilities and significantly enhance human cognition. Up to this point, it has been customary to engage directly with technical or security challenges or, more narrowly, with those of a professional nature. In this context, however, our primary concern lies with how the company articulates its ideas and cultivates public readiness for its strategic objectives. It is important to emphasize that this paper does not primarily address the technical or scientific implications of BCI systems, but rather the ways in which Neuralink constructs a public image around its technology. This will not be examined in isolation, but as part of a symbolic framework that mirrors Christian motifs associated with messianic deeds.

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Religious symbolism has largely permeated the narratives around new technologies to date. It "constantly emerges as a metaphorical component of the [Californian] ideology that is fueled by the public interventions of prominent figures in Big Tech."[2] This approach largely rests on the belief that technology can redeem, transform, or save humanity from its core problems, like disease, mortality, the climate crisis, or existential limitations. It often involves viewing technology not merely as a tool, but as an almost spiritual force that will bring ultimate improvement to human life.[3] That is what we have referred to as technological salvation.[4]

The concept of religious symbolism refers to a specific form of expression of sacred meanings within religious beliefs and practices. Eliade describes it as follows: "By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in the surrounding cosmic milieu."[5] Although not very common, it is known that religious symbolism can appear outside formal religious settings. This can be traced in marketing campaigns, and one of the most well-known examples is Coca-Cola's strategic use of Christian imagery, most notably its iconic portrayal of Santa Claus, which draws upon the symbolism of Saint Nicholas and the cultural associations of the Christmas season. Another well-known example is the marketing campaign surrounding the iPhone, which has been labeled as the Jesus phone. This illustrates, according to Campbell and

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2 Massimiliano Panarari and Gianni Gili, "Spiritual Technologies: The Religious Symbolism of the Digital Universe," *Religions* 15 (2024): 1320, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111320.

3 Michael Leidenhag, "Saved Through Technology: Exploring the Soteriology and Eschatology of Transhumanism," *Religion Compass* 14, no. 11 (2020): e12377, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12377.

4 Leonie Fourie, "Technology and Theology: Finding the Real God," in *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy and Education*, ed. J. Van den Berg (Bloemfontein: Sun Media, 2020), 32. Fourie describes this form of eschatological hope in technology as *technological eschatology*; Katleho Mokoena, "Transcendence in African Spirituality and the Techno-Utopia," *Practical Theology* 18, no. 2 (2025): 145, https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2025.2477336.

5 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957), 12.

La Pastina, "that religious discourse can function both to affirm and to critique technological enterprises."[6]

The central aim, in this context, is to demonstrate that Neuralink's marketing model appropriates elements of religious discourse, most notably by evoking the figure of the Christian God as depicted in the New Testament. This insight is articulated by V. Findrik, who identifies this parallel under the syntagma "Jesus Christ as an unexpected marketing model."[7] By analyzing these symbolic parallels, one could argue that Neuralink offers a form of technological salvation to distinguish itself within a field of competitors.

On Neuralink's Product

Neuralink is a neurotechnology company founded by Elon Musk in 2016, dedicated to the development of advanced brain-computer interface (BCI) systems that seek to enable a bidirectional communication pathway between the human brain and external digital devices.[8] Neuralink is positioned at the intersection of neuroscience, biomedical engineering, and artificial intelligence.

The core innovation of the company lies in the creation of a high-bandwidth neural implant (with a surgery robot) designed not only to treat a range of neurological disorders, such as paralysis, blindness, and memory loss, but also to potentially augment human cognitive capabilities.[9] In 2022, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declined Neuralink's application to commence human clinical trials, citing significant safety concerns, including risks associated with the lithium battery, the potential migration of microelectrodes within the

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[6] Heidi A. Campbell and Antonio C. La Pastina, "How the iPhone Became Divine: New Media, Religion and the Intertextual Circulation of Meaning," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 7 (2010): 1192, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810362204.

[7] Stjepan Štivić and Valentino Findrik, *Transhumanizam i kršćanstvo [Transhumanism and Christianity]* (Zagreb: Centar za bioetiku, Fakultet filozofije i religijskih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2024), 102

[8] Elon Musk et al., "An Integrated Brain–Machine Interface Platform With Thousands of Channels," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 21, no. 10 (2019): e16194, https://doi.org/10.2196/16194.

[9] *Ibid.*

brain, and uncertainties regarding the safety of the device without compromising neural tissue.[10] In 2023, they received approval to initiate clinical trials on human subjects, marking a pivotal moment in the transition from theoretical research to practical application. The first human implantation was reportedly carried out in early 2024.[11]

As of early 2025, Neuralink has successfully implanted its BCI device in three human participants as part of its ongoing clinical trial. The first recipient, Noland Arbaugh, a quadriplegic patient, underwent implantation in January 2024. Since then, he has demonstrated the ability to control a computer cursor and play video games using only neural signals.[12] In June 2024, Neuralink implanted its second participant, known as Alex, a quadriplegic former automotive technician. Within days, Alex demonstrated high-precision neural control, playing video games using thought alone and designing 3D objects using CAD software. His implant showed improved stability compared to the first recipient, due to surgical refinements that minimized electrode retraction. These outcomes highlight significant progress in restoring functional autonomy through high-bandwidth BCI.[13]

The third recipient, Brad Smith, a nonverbal patient living with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, received the implant by early 2025. He has since shown the capacity to manipulate a digital cursor, edit video content, and communicate via a synthetic voice interface, marking a significant advance in restoring communicative autonomy to individuals with severe motor impairments.[14] From a symbolic perspective,

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10 Rachael Levy and Marisa Taylor, "U.S. Regulators Rejected Elon Musk's Bid to Test Brain Chips in Humans, Citing Safety Risks," *Reuters*, March 2, 2023, A Reuters Special Report, archived March 2, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/neuralink-musk-fda/.

11 Laura Daniella Sepulveda and Shelby Slade, "Arizona Native Noland Arbaugh Is First Neuralink Patient: What to Know," *Arizona Republic*, March 21, 2024, accessed May 8, 2024, https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2024/03/21/noland-arbaugh-first-neuralink-patient-from-arizona/72911013007/.

12 *Ibid*.

13 Leigh Mc Gowran, "Neuralink Shares Positive Progress of Second BrainImplant Patient," *SiliconRepublic*, August 5, 2024, accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.siliconrepublic.com/innovation/neuralink-second-patient-brain-implant-update.

14 Sarah Jackson, "The First Nonverbal Patient to Receive Elon Musk's Neuralink Shares a Video He Edited and Narrated Using His Brain Chip," *Business Insider*, May 5, 2025, accessed

these healing cases resonate with biblical accounts of messianic deeds, a connection that will be explored in greater detail later in this paper.

One of the key characteristics of Neuralink lies in the fact that it is not merely developing an implant device, but rather actively shaping a broader sociotechnical imaginary, an imaginary that intertwines the concept of autonomy, the notion of technological innovation, and the trajectory of medical progress.[15] The inclusion of these technical details is not intended as a full scientific analysis, but rather as necessary context: Neuralink itself strategically mobilizes these elements when shaping its promotional rhetoric. Through its design choices and public messaging, Neuralink promotes a specific vision of the future. This vision serves not only to guide public perception and investment interest, but also to influence ongoing ethical debates and expectations surrounding BCI technologies.[16]

The Assumptions of Neuralink's Approach

Neuralink is in some ways characterized as a transhumanist company.[17] While such a characterization may be justified, it remains incomplete without further elaboration. To provide a more comprehensive understanding, it is necessary to examine the underlying assumptions that inform Neuralink's approach, both from an anthropological standpoint and as part of the framework of its marketing strategy.

At the outset, it is useful to distinguish between two principal categories: technical assumptions and, more broadly, anthropological assumptions. For example, technical assumptions are:[18] Neuralink is

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June 25, 2025, https://www.businessinsider.com/als-neuralink-patient-edits-video-brain-ai-voice-elon-musk-2025-5.

15 Aishu Hombal, *A Sociotechnical Imaginary for Neuralink* (Bachelor's thesis, University of Virginia, School of Engineering and Applied Science, 2021), unpublished.

16 Toni Garbe, "The Presentation of Brain–Computer Interfaces as AutonomyEnhancing Therapy Products," *NanoEthics* 18, no. 3 (2024): 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11569-024-00462-9.

17 Neil C. Hughes, "Transhumanism and Neuralink: The Dawn of Digitally Enhanced Humans," *Cybernews*, June 10, 2023, accessed June 25, 2025, https://cybernews.com/editorial/transhumanism-and-neuralink/.

18 Musk et al., "An Integrated Brain–Machine Interface," e16194.

based on BCI technology. This technology uses electrodes that penetrate the brain or are placed on its surface, enabling direct communication with the device; This communication or transmission of data is bidirectional; the implant is the size of a coin and is implanted in the skull. From it, a series of tiny wires extend into the patient's brain, each about 20 times thinner than a human hair. These wires are equipped with 1024 electrodes that can monitor brain activity and theoretically electrically stimulate the brain. Based on Neuralink's agenda, several underlying philosophical assumptions may be identified: Thoughts are entirely the product of neural dynamics in the brain; they are readable and can be read using technology. This allows us to perform physical tasks using only our thoughts in connection with external devices; The brain serves as the electronic hub of the nervous system. Based on these assumptions, BCI technology should enable us to create an electronic device for solving electronic issues within that system.

Beyond the technical assumptions, Neuralink's discourse implicitly targets fundamental human dimensions. These dimensions reveal that Neuralink is not merely selling a technical device, but actively promoting an anthropological conception of the human being. Four aspects are particularly significant: the body (the promise of restoring sight, movement, and speech), the mind (the extension of cognitive capacities and potential symbiosis with artificial intelligence), autonomy (the restoration of independence to those who have lost it), and control (the ability of thought to direct devices, which raises questions about privacy and freedom). By framing its product through these dimensions, Neuralink does not simply describe technical functions but symbolically redefines what it means to be human, thus transforming a medical device into a narrative about the future of humanity itself. This symbolic horizon indicates that Neuralink's discourse is articulated within a secularized form of a religious narrative of redemption.

This, however, does not stem from radical technical innovation. On the contrary, the perceived genuine novelty of Neuralink lies in the symbolic register, while its device largely builds upon existing research and established engineering paradigms. Several companies had already been engaged in the development of neural implant technologies long before Neuralink entered the field. From a purely technical standpoint,

therefore, Neuralink does not represent a substantial breakthrough, but rather a symbolic repackaging of established neurotechnological frameworks.

The concept of BCI technology can be traced back several decades, rooted in a long-standing aspiration to advance neurotechnology.[19] The first documented effort to translate neural activity into the control of external devices was conducted in 1966 by Evarts, who recorded neuronal firing patterns in monkeys during motor tasks. The term brain-computer interface itself was formally introduced in 1973 by Jacques Vidal at the Brain Research Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles. The institute's objective was to connect the inductive reasoning capabilities of the human brain with the deductive processing power of computers.[20] The study of BCI technology has its own history, and the emergence of Neuralink is merely one of the more recent developments in this field, albeit one that has significantly popularized this technology.

To date, a range of companies and products have emerged that utilize BCI technology. One such company, Synchron, received FDA Investigational Device Exemption (IDE) in July 2021, five years after submitting its initial application, allowing it to begin human clinical trials in the U.S. The company's BCI system, delivered via a minimally invasive endovascular procedure, is designed to assist individuals with severe paralysis in operating digital devices.[21] In addition, there are several other relevant companies in the field of BCI technology. NeuroPace (1997), received FDA approval in 2013 for its implantable device designed to treat epilepsy by reducing the frequency of seizures. Blackrock Neurotech (1998) has received FDA Breakthrough Device designation for its MoveAgain BCI system. This system is intended to

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[19] Agnieszka Kawala-Sterniuk et al., "Summary of Over Fifty Years with Brain–Computer Interfaces: A Review," *Brain Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2021): 43, 7–10, https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci11010043.

[20] Hombal, *A Sociotechnical Imaginary for Neuralink*, 5.

[21] J. J. Han, "Synchron Receives FDA Approval to Begin Early Feasibility Study of Their Endovascular, Brain–Computer Interface Device," *Artificial Organs* 45, no. 10 (October 2021): 1134–1135, https://doi.org/10.1111/aor.14049.

enable individuals with severe motor impairments to control external devices, etc.[22]

One of the fundamental questions is, why is Neuralink widely known, while other companies developing similar technologies remain relatively unknown?[23] One might be inclined to attribute this disparity to the ethical controversies associated with Neuralink. More significantly, however, Neuralink uses the strategy of the acceptance-shaping function by presenting it in ethically and emotionally compelling terms.[24]

The answer lies primarily in the marketing model or several of them that underpin Neuralink's promotional strategy. It is important to note that, at this stage, the focus is not on the literal commercialization of a product, but rather on the promotion of a concept, a carefully constructed vision intended to generate public interest and attract public acceptance for its continued development.

The Goals of Neuralink

Initially, Neuralink's product is presented as a medical device, but its underlying mission is more broadly defined: "Creating a generalized brain interface to restore autonomy to those with unmet medical needs today and unlock human potential tomorrow" or "To restore independence and improve lives [...]"[25] If we consider this Neuralink's defined mission, it is evident that the applicability of the brain implant is intended to be extensive.

However, Musk has announced two primary promises or goals. Firstly, restoring sight to those born blind and helping patients with spinal cord injuries regain the ability to move. Musk also believes that eventually, everyone will develop various neurological issues, and this is where the product developed by Neuralink will find its broader

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22 Levy and Taylor, "U.S. Regulators Rejected Elon Musk's Bid."

23 Anita Ko and Nancy S. Jecker, "Several Companies Are Testing Brain Implants – Why Is There So Much Attention Swirling around Neuralink? Two Professors Unpack the Ethical Issues," *The Conversation*, February 14, 2024, accessed June 24, 2025, https://theconversation.com/several-companies-are-testing-brain-implants-why-is-there-so-much-attention-swirling-around-neuralink-two-professors-unpack-the-ethical-issues-222556.

24 Garbe, "Presentation of Brain–Computer Interfaces," 6.

25 Neuralink, "Homepage," accessed June 25, 2025, https://neuralink.com/.

application. On another occasion, he specifies the normalization of other neurological issues more precisely, such as memory loss, hearing loss, blindness, paralysis, depression, insomnia, extreme pain, seizures, anxiety, addiction, stroke, and brain damage.[26] Additionally, diseases and disorders such as autism, depression, schizophrenia, and obesity are mentioned.

The long-term goals, which are not emphasized in Neuralink's marketing discourse, relate to what Elon Musk has described as the company's overarching aspiration: "to improve the AI–human symbiosis by increasing the bandwidth of communication."[27] Similarly, Matthew MacDougall, Neuralink's lead neurosurgeon, has articulated the company's broader vision as "the full expansion of human cognition into artificial intelligence without limitations, enabling unrestricted communication and the interconnection of human minds."[28]

Two key characteristics emerge from the outlined goals: first, the "tendency to overpromise, can overshadow the actual progress,"[29] and second, the narrative surrounding the product exceeds its technical capabilities and practical applicability.

The Campaign and Religious Symbolism

A more detailed observation shows that Neuralink combines two dominant marketing paradigms: marketing orientation and relationship orientation. To understand this more clearly, it is useful to highlight the main elements through which Neuralink conducts its campaign.

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[26] Neuralink, *Neuralink Progress Update, Summer 2020*, video, 2:15, posted August 28, 2020, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVvmgjBL74w.

[27] Elon Musk, *Elon Musk and the Future of Humanity*, interview by Lex Fridman, *Lex Fridman Podcast*, audio podcast, March 2024, https://lexfridman.com/elon-musk-and-the-future-of-humanity/.

[28] Matthew MacDougall, *Neuralink & Technologies to Enhance Human Brains*, interview by Andrew Huberman, *Huberman Lab*, audio podcast, April 2023, https://hubermanlab.com/neuralink-and-technologies-to-enhance-human-brains/.

[29] John Can Gedik, "Neuralink: The Hype and the Reality Three Years Later," *LinkedIn*, January 25, 2025, accessed June 24, 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/neuralink-hype-reality-three-years-later-john-can-gedik-ddzle.

Neuralink's campaign can be described through four interconnected components: (1) public appearances and livestream demonstrations that emphasize technical transparency, (2) patient testimonials that generate emotional resonance and credibility, (3) Musk's charismatic presence in interviews and on social media, where he embodies visionary leadership, and (4) official promotional materials that employ slogans such as 'restoring independence'[30] and 'unlocking potential.'[31] Together, these elements construct a hybrid narrative that combines technical progress, emotional identification, and visionary promise, thus shaping an image of technological salvation. When placed against the Christian messianic tradition, Musk's public charisma and Neuralink's rhetoric of healing directly parallel the role of Christ as healer and savior.

From the perspective of marketing orientation, Neuralink identifies clear user needs, such as communication for individuals in need, and presents its technology as a solution.[32] It applies educational marketing through livestreams, white papers, and public demonstrations, cultivating awareness and demand. From the relationship orientation standpoint,[33] Neuralink focuses on building long-term trust with its audience by offering transparent updates, emotionally resonant patient testimonials, and community engagement through social media. Elon Musk, as a charismatic figure, also personifies the visionary leadership that enhances loyalty and belief in the company's mission.

In doing so, Neuralink does not merely market a product but promotes something else—or more precisely, the product "becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself."[34] The company employs a religious symbolic marketing logic where the technological product represents liberation from existential human limitation. Religious

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30 Neuralink, "Neuralink Raises $650M Series E," *Updates*, Neuralink.com, June 2, 2025, accessed 15 September 2025, https://neuralink.com/updates/neuralink-raises-650m-series-e/.

31 Neuralink, "Homepage," accessed June 25, 2025, https://neuralink.com/.

32 Hamed Gheysari, Amran Rasli, Parastoo Roghanian, and Nadhirah Norhalim, "A Review on the Market Orientation Evolution," *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 40 (2012): 543, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.03.228.

33 Laith Alrubaiee and Nasser AlNazer, "Investigate the Impact of Relationship Marketing Orientation on Customer Loyalty: The Customer's Perspective," *International Journal of Marketing Studies* 2, no. 1 (2010): 157, https://doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v2n1p155.

34 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.

symbolism is used to lend the Neuralink implant legitimacy, credibility, and emotional weight, much like when a brand employs scientists or celebrities to endorse its product. The symbolic and overpromising message is *I offer you what no other human can give you*.

It is important to emphasize that, much like Edward Bernays, who systematically applied the concept of third-party endorsement,[35] Neuralink adopts a comparable strategy by incorporating elements of religious symbolism into its promotional narrative as third-party credibility to legitimize its product. In Neuralink's case, the symbolic framework draws on Christianity, and more specifically, the figure of Jesus Christ, which functions as a model within its marketing strategy.

Similarities with Christian Symbolism

Within religious symbolism, a deeper question emerges: Who is the one who offers or grants what no one else can? The one who enables the blind to see, the deaf to hear, and the lame to walk again? Within the Christian tradition, these deeds are attributed to the Messiah and are understood as signs heralding the arrival of the messianic age.

When Neuralink promotes its product within the framework of its stated marketing orientations, it primarily focuses on short-term goals aimed at shaping acceptance. However, while often overpromising, the company simultaneously and implicitly invokes religious symbolism, suggesting a salvific dimension to its work as its long-term objectives involving experimentation with artificial intelligence remain obscured. The symbolism within the marketing model aligns with messianic imagery, as seen in the following: The blind shall regain their sight (Mark. 10:52; Luke 18:42 etc.); The deaf shall hear again (Mark. 7:35 etc.); The paralyzed shall walk (Mark. 2:1–12; John. 5:8–9 etc.).

The key compilation passage is: "Jesus said to them in reply, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind have regained their sight, the

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[35] Tonina Ibrulj and Ivana Zovko-Bošnjak, "Lexicon of Public Relations: Exploring Edward Bernays' Influence on Introducing Public Relations Concepts and Vocabulary Terms," *South Eastern European Journal of Communication* 5 (special issue, 2023): 57, https://doi.org/10.47960/27120457.2023.1.S.5.53.

lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:4-6) From a symbolic perspective, the question that precedes this passage invites a deeper reflection on the religious imaginaries subtly appropriated within Neuralink's marketing model. "When John heard in prison of the works [deeds] of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him with this question, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?'" This functions not merely as a textual reference, but as a paradigmatic expression of messianic expectation, one that resonates with the implicit promises embedded in the rhetoric surrounding Neuralink. Through this parallel, the syntagma Jesus Christ as a marketing model becomes clear and it may be attributed to Neuralink's marketing, although there are certainly other candidates that could be similarly characterized. Thus, each technological promise (restoring sight, enabling the paralyzed to move, and giving voice to the voiceless) becomes legible as a modern re-enactment of messianic motifs.

Conclusion

Although not very common, it is well-known that religious symbolism can appear outside formal religious settings, particularly in marketing campaigns. Perhaps the most famous example is Coca-Cola's use of religious imagery, especially through its iconic portrayal of Santa Claus, which draws on the symbolism of Saint Nicholas and Christmas time, or the highly intriguing religious symbolism constructed around the iPhone as the *Jesus phone*, both by its producers and its users.

Neuralink borrows language, imagery, and ideas that function as religious motifs, framing its product as something beyond the ordinary, something redemptive or transcendent. The similarity to religious, specifically Christian, symbolism is undeniable. However, this symbolism remains implicit rather than explicit. The way in which the resemanticization of the messianic deeds of Jesus Christ operates in the context of Neuralink's promises may be one of the reasons for the company's public position and relative popularity compared to its competitors.

It is difficult to determine, but one might speculate that the Christian message has become an archetype of Western civilization, and that the instrumentalization of what we have described as the marketing model of Jesus Christ is playing on a subconscious human longing. Or is it, more broadly, the instrumentalization of the inherent human need for the *religious*? This raises the question of how far modern technological discourse depends on religious symbolism to secure its authority.

The only similarity between miracles in Christianity and the promises found in Neuralink's promotional discourse lies in the fact that neither function as an end in itself; rather, both point toward 'something beyond.' In Christian symbolism, miracles signify a deeper reality, the complete transformation of life and the acceptance of the message of the Christian proclamation. However, in the case of Neuralink, this dimension remains notably vague and obscured.

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REGULAR PAPERS

DRUGE RAZPRAVE

HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM IN THAILAND: PRACTICES, LOCAL PATRONAGE, AND CHALLENGES

Yue Bai (Yao Fa),
Yaoping Liu

Introduction

Humanistic Buddhism is an approach that emphasizes Buddhist principles in daily life to promote societal harmony and personal satisfaction. In the early 20th century, Taixu, a Buddhist reformist, defined Humanistic Buddhism as a form of Buddhism that places a higher value on human concerns rather than solely on spiritual existence or the afterlife.[1] Master Hsing Yun further refined this ideology by emphasizing the practice of altruism, kindness, and the pleasure derived from assisting others.[2] According to Donald K Swearer,[3] Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand has integrated the Theravāda heritage with contemporary principles to address modern social issues.

[1] Cristina Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization," in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. Mcmahan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 289–303.
[2] Eric Goodell, "Conservative and Progressive Models for Buddhism under the Republic of China," *Religion, Culture, and the Public Sphere in China and Japan*, ed. Albert Welter and Jeffrey Newmark (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 43–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2437-5_3.
[3] Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2010).

https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2025.500 | Poligrafi, no. 119/120, vol. 30, 2025, pp. 259–294

Empirical research suggests that Humanistic Buddhism improves social life using communal engagements, rituals, and meditation. Sallie B. King[4] found that temples in Thailand made substantial contributions to the community's welfare by implementing educational and health initiatives, while Cristina Rocha[5] noted that Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan prioritized community empowerment, a practice subsequently adopted in Thailand. However, challenges continue to exist. Urbanization, globalization, and the erosion of traditional values are among the obstacles that hinder the practice of Humanistic Buddhism, as noted by Swearer[6] and Dat Manh Nguyen.[7] In East Asia,[8] underscored the importance of collaboration between Buddhist institutions and the government in the context of government funding and assistance. However, this strategy has not been completely implemented in Thailand.

The implementation of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand is significantly influenced by its three components—individual, universal, and transcendental. The practice of meditation and introspection to achieve inner tranquility are separate components.[9] illustrates that meditation aids individuals in grappling with the pressures of modern life.[10] observed that the global aspect includes an invitation to promote social harmony, suggesting that Buddhist teachings aid in unifying diverse societies. As Xue Yu[11] articulated, the transcendental dimension

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4 Sallie B. King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism," in *Buddhism in the Modern World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 195–213.

5 Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization."

6 Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*.

7 Dat Manh Nguyen, *Crafting a Buddhist Public: Urban Buddhism and Youth Aspirations in Late-Socialist Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Boston University, 2020).

8 Yoshiko Ashiwa, "Positioning Religion in Modernity: State and Buddhism in China," in *Religion in Today's World*, ed. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 125–45, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804771139-004.

9 Jianxun Shi, "The Path to Liberation," in Jianxun Shi, *Mapping the Buddhist Path to Liberation: Diversity and Consistency Based on the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021), 21–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1152-0.

10 Phrakru Arunsutalangkarn, "Buddhism and Education in Thai Society," *Journal of Buddhist Education and Research (JBER)* 2, no. 1 (2016): 8–16.

11 Xue Yu, "Re-Creation of Rituals in Humanistic Buddhism: A Case Study of FoGuangShan," *Asian Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2013): 350–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2013.831609.

emphasizes the ultimate goal of existence as the transcendence of suffering and attaining enlightenment.

Humanity, Emphasis on Daily Life, Altruism, Joyfulness, Timeliness, and Universality are the six characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism, which are separated from the three aspects.[12] posits that Buddhist teachings should be applied for the benefit of humanity rather than solely for spiritual purposes. The importance of Buddhist teachings in addressing commonplace issues is emphasized by the emphasis on daily life.[13] According to Sallie B. King,[14] altruism fosters empathy for others, as evidenced by the temple's participation in social initiatives. Buddhist practices, such as meditation and communal activities, are motivated by joy to help individuals achieve contentment.[15] The concept of timeliness emphasizes adapting Buddhist doctrines to address contemporary challenges, such as urbanization and environmental concerns.[16] Ultimately, universality emphasizes the importance of peace and inclusivity, as demonstrated by Humanistic Buddhism's call for inter-religious tolerance.[17]

Recent studies suggest a lack of research on Humanistic Buddhism.[18] Most research focuses on the Chinese context[19] or Vietnam;[20] however, few exhaustive studies pertain to Thailand. Thailand is distinguished from other Southeast Asian nations by its unique and extensive Buddhist

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12 Goodell, "Conservative and Progressive Models for Buddhism under the Republic of China."

13 Hasrina Mustafa et al., "Malaysian Generational Cohorts in the New Media Era: Historical Events and Collective Memory," *Media Asia* 49, no. 3 (2022): 235–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.2018536.

14 Sallie B. King, "Mindfulness, Compassion and Skillful Means in Engaged Buddhism," *Mindfulness* 14 (2023): 2516–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01847-1.

15 Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization."

16 Nguyen, *Crafting a Buddhist Public*.

17 Arunsutalangkarn, "Buddhism and Education in Thai Society."

18 Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization"; Arunsutalangkarn, "Buddhism and Education in Thai Society"; Nguyen, *Crafting a Buddhist Public*; Shi, "The Path to Liberation"; Theo Stapleton and Yu Tao, "The Emergence of Transcultural Humanistic Buddhism through the Lens of Religious Entrepreneurship," *Asian Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2022): 312–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2021.1970105.

19 Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization"; Stapleton and Tao, "The Emergence of Transcultural Humanistic Buddhism through the Lens of Religious Entrepreneurship."

20 Nguyen, *Crafting a Buddhist Public*.

heritage. Moreover, the impact of local patronage, such as governmental support and local finance, on implementing Humanistic Buddhism within Thai culture has generally not been explicitly examined in prior studies.[21] Internal dynamics and the development of empathy among community members are among the current issues that have not been sufficiently addressed in this context.[22]

The discourse on the three principal components (individual, universal, and transcendental) has been delineated in prior research, but their interactions in developing comprehensive religious practices have not been synthesized. In the sociocultural context of Thailand, the six fundamental qualities of Humanistic Buddhism (Humanity, Emphasis on Daily Life, Altruism, Joyfulness, Timeliness, and Universality) are rarely examined in depth.[23] Additionally, most current research lacks empirical methodologies that involve direct respondents through surveys or interviews.[24] This study examines the practices, local support, and obstacles in implementing the three primary features and six characteristics within the country's unique social and cultural environment.

Three Aspects of Humanistic Buddhism

The primary focus of Buddhist Humanism is on the emancipation of oneself from what is most commonly referred to as suffering (dukkha).[25] This pattern is typically expressed in the form of four noble

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21 Arunsutalangkarn, "Buddhism and Education in Thai Society"; Yaoping Liu, "A Study of Chinese Lay Buddhist Societies in Thailand: History and Current State," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, no. 16 (2021), https://thecjbs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/75-114_Liu_Chinese-Lay-Buddhist-Societies-in-Thailand.pdf.

22 Nguyen, *Crafting a Buddhist Public*; Shi, "The Path to Liberation."

23 Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*; Goodell, "Conservative and Progressive Models for Buddhism under the Republic of China"; Dongxiao Zheng and Yaoping Liu, "China–Thai Cultural Diplomacy Through the Buddhist Wat: A Case Study of the Thai Wat in Chaozhou Kaiyuan Si, Guangdong," *Religions* 15, no. 11 (2024): 1365, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111365; Yaoping Liu, Pharatt Run, and Metteyya Beliatte, "Eco-Sattva: A Buddhist Response to the Plastic Waste Crisis in Thailand," *Frontiers in Psychology* 16 (2025): 1482883, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1482883.

24 King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism."

25 Kristin Culbertson, *Embracing the Non-Ideal: A Suffering-Oriented Ethical Approach* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2021); Kamlesh Singh et al., "Buddhism and Its Contribution to Positive Psychology," in *Religious and Spiritual Practices in India: A Positive*

truths. The third truth, "the truth of the cessation of suffering" (dukkhanirodha), defines the emancipation from suffering as an objective. In the Buddhist doctrine of emancipation, various specific concepts and terms are employed.[26] These terms can be categorized into three classes in order to differentiate between three distinct aspects of the doctrine of emancipation: terms that are derived from the verb root "to awaken" (bodhi, samyaksaṃbodhi, abhisambodhi, etc.), terms that express the meaning of cessation (nirodha, nivṛtti, and niṣṭhā), and terms that are derived from the verb root "to release" (vimokṣa, vimukti, and nirmocana). All of these are executed on three distinct levels: the (human) individual (pudgala), the domain of sentient creatures (sattvadhatu), and the level of transcending the world (lokottara). The three-level paradigm for interpreting Buddhist Humanism is based on this classification: individual, universal, and Transcendental Humanism.

The traditional Buddhist path of spiritual development, known as individual Humanism,[27] is designed to liberate the individual from suffering. The original Buddhist doctrine of emancipation is formulated as the eightfold path contained in the fourth noble truth, with a focal point on the individual. This prompts the individual to engage in personal endeavor, adopt a specific worldview, engage in particular behaviors and lifestyles, and engage in spiritual exercises, ultimately leading to the attainment of Buddhahood. An individual who embodies this ideal is known as arhat, or "the one who has attained Buddhahood," and in the Mahāyāna texts, pratyekabuddha, or "Buddha for oneself."

The concept of Humanism is predominantly conveyed in this context by the concept that the unique opportunity to be born as a human being should be utilized, at the very least, to enhance one's condition

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Psychological Perspective, ed. Kamlesh Singh and Gaurav Saxena (Singapore: Springer, 2023), 113–39, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-2397-7_6.

[26] Prashant Behl, Manoj Singh, and M. N. Sondhi, *Awakening the Inner Self: The Spiritual Disciplines and Meditation of Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Shri Sai Printographers, 2023).

[27] Stapleton and Tao, "The Emergence of Transcultural Humanistic Buddhism through the Lens of Religious Entrepreneurship"; Yael Malin, "Humanistic Mindfulness: A Bridge between Traditional and Modern Mindfulness in Schools," *Journal of Transformative Education* 21, no. 1 (2023): 102–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446221084004.

and, ideally, to accomplish complete emancipation from suffering.[28] Nevertheless, this encompasses the universal and transcendental aspects of Humanism. Initially, the obligation to transmit the tradition, or, in Buddhist rhetoric, "to keep the Dharma wheel turning," is primarily attributed to bhikshus or mendicant priests. Secondly, the cultivation of the ethics that serve as the foundation of the spiritual path through one's actions, which has the potential to influence others. The third objective is the realization of long-term evolution, as Buddhism posits that the entire sequence of birth and rebirth through an incalculable number of lives in the samsara is, in the ideal sense, intended for maturation and preparation for the final emancipation. This obstacle has been surmounted through arhat, thereby achieving the transcendental state.

Universal Humanism, as exemplified by the Bodhisattva path,[29] is primarily cultivated in the Mahāyāna schools and sects and is extensively and meticulously described in numerous Mahāyāna sutras. It is crucial to underscore the type of individual who attains the Buddha state independently: the Bodhisattva (awakening being). However, they have extended the objective of relief (or, more precisely, liberation) from suffering to all sentient beings, including humans. Uncompromising altruism, or mahākaruṇā (great compassion), is the primary characteristic of Buddhist Universal Humanism. A Bodhisattva is an active social type who deliberately works toward this goal and vows to alleviate the suffering of all beings.

Additionally, Universal Humanism is inextricably linked to the other two. Despite its subsidiary significance on the scale of values, individual emancipation, with all of its principles and series of endeavors,

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[28] Oliver Kozlarek, "From the Humanism of Critical Theory to Critical Humanism," *European Journal of Social Theory* 24, no. 2 (2021): 246–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020960958; Jana S Rošker, "The Human Being as the Core of Humanism," in Jana S Rošker, *Humanism in Trans-Civilizational Perspectives: Relational Subjectivity and Social Ethics in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023), 77–103, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-37518-7.

[29] Jian Chen, "Humanistic Buddhism: Plurality and Humanistic Buddhism in the Context of a Buddho-Christian Comparison," 人間佛教學報 藝文= *Humanistic Buddhism Journal, Arts, and Culture*, no. 26 (2020): 164–205, https://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JRBJ010/bj010591739.pdf.

is an unavoidable prerequisite for realizing the Bodhisattva ideal of Universal Humanism. The Bodhisattva also achieves the objective of Transcendental Humanism by liberating creatures, which involves restructuring the universe by establishing states of consciousness that transcend worldly realities (laukika dharma).

Transcendental Humanism is a term that refers to the tendency in all branches of Buddhism,[30] particularly the *Mahāyāna* sutras, to describe the emancipated state as a new reality. This is a completely restructured universe in which the laws of the ordinary universe of the unawakened mind do not apply, and the causes and conditions that generate suffering have been eliminated. This universe, which is emancipated through a transformative essence, is defined as a Buddha-field that has been completely purified (parisodhita buddhaksetra).[31] Buddha is the human variety that corresponds to that level. In its most comprehensive form, all Buddhists are involved in the realization of this transcendental objective, which encompasses both individual and universal humanism and their emancipation doctrines.[32] However, purified Buddha domains are also called emancipated universes in the plural. There are a great many Buddhist mythological cosmologies, and they have varying names and structures.

While Humanistic Buddhism is rooted in the values of compassion, social ethics, and relevance to daily life, it is important to distinguish it from another reformist trend known as Socially Engaged Buddhism. Both of these movements share a commitment to addressing suffering and promoting ethical living, but they differ significantly in their historical origins, philosophical orientation, and methodological approaches to social engagement. Humanistic Buddhism was developed by several reformers, such as Taixu and Master Hsing Yun. The purpose of the reformation is to incorporate Buddhist teachings into

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30 Seth Zuihō Segall, *Buddhism and Human Flourishing: A Modern Western Perspective* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37027-5.

31 Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne, eds., *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

32 Makola Mangala Thero, *The Evolution of the Concept of the Buddha Within the Pāli Canon and Commentaries* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of the West, 2022), https://ir.uwest.edu/files/original/8aa3082686700179 93fcef53615103203f3a5b85.pdf.

everyday life to foster individual spiritual growth and social harmony. The practices emphasize altruism, inner joy, and cultural adaptation as they are often manifested through community service and education within institutional frameworks supported by state or local patronage.[33] In contrast, Socially Engaged Buddhism, popularized by figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, is more activist and politically responsive. This tradition emerged as a direct response to structural oppression, conflict, and social injustice, emphasizing critical engagement with issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, and social discrimination.[34]

These differences also reflect different responses to the challenges of modernity, such as globalization, urbanization, and the erosion of traditional values. Humanistic Buddhism tends to respond by consolidating cultural values and local welfare programs and creating stable spiritual spaces without directly confronting the political system. In contrast, Socially Engaged Buddhism seeks to dismantle the root causes of inequality through advocacy, protest, and grassroots community empowerment. In the Thai context, Humanistic Buddhism, as practiced by Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi, emphasizes social stability through peaceful integration, while Socially Engaged Buddhism, as practiced by Phra Phaisal Visalo and organizations such as the Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation, actively critiques corruption, class inequality, and structural injustice. This framework thus helps us understand Humanistic Buddhism not simply as a spiritual practice but as a cultural response that negotiates with existing social structures—as opposed to Socially Engaged Buddhism, which is transformative and confrontational in shaping contemporary Buddhist discourse and social action.

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[33] Goodell, "Conservative and Progressive Models for Buddhism under the Republic of China"; Rocha, "Buddhism and Globalization."

[34] King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism"; Linda Jane Douglas, "Ethical Underpinnings and Social Work: A Case Study on the Role of Buddhist Compassion in Cambodian Sustainable Development," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 43, no. 3 (2024): 348–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2024.2365803.

Hypothesis and Research Question

1. The Conceptualization and Practice of the Core Principles of Humanistic Buddhism

This study hypothesizes that the Thai Buddhists' conceptualization and practice of the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism—namely humanity, daily life, altruism, joy, timeliness, and universality—are positively correlated with their levels of religious engagement, community involvement, and exposure to Humanistic Buddhist teachings. To test this, key principles are operationalized into measurable variables: "humanity" and "altruism" are assessed through self-reported acts of compassion and volunteerism; "daily life" and "timeliness" are measured by the frequency and integration of Humanistic teachings into routine activities; "joy" is captured through well-being indicators linked to spiritual practices; and "universality" is evaluated via attitudes toward inclusivity and interfaith openness. Given the patterns and themes identified in the preceding discussion, it becomes essential to formulate a hypothesis that can be tested through further investigation.

Hypothesis

H1: Thai Buddhists' conceptualization and practice of the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism.

Research Question 1:

How do Thai Buddhists conceptualize and practice the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism in their daily religious and social lives?

11. Local Patronage and the Continuity of Humanistic Buddhism

This study hypothesizes that local patronage significantly contributes to the development and continuity of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand through financial, social, and symbolic support. Specifically, it posits that (1) financial contributions from local lay patrons are positively associated with the institutional growth of Humanistic Buddhist temples; (2) the social influence of patrons enhances the sustainability of

Humanistic Buddhist programs and outreach efforts; and (3) community engagement encouraged by patronage correlates with the perceived relevance of Humanistic Buddhist values, such as altruism and application in daily life, among practitioners. These hypotheses are operationalized through measurable variables including donation amounts, the number of influential patrons involved, the frequency and longevity of temple programs, volunteer retention rates, and survey responses capturing lay perceptions of Humanistic principles. Building upon the background and context outlined above, the following hypothesis is proposed to guide the direction of this study.

Hypothesis:

H2: Local patronage significantly contributes to the institutional and community-based growth of Humanistic Buddhist practices in Thailand.

Research Questions 2:

How does local patronage influence the development and sustained practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand?

III. The Challenges in Practicing the Core Principles of Humanistic Buddhism

This study hypothesizes that Thai Buddhists face specific social, institutional, and personal challenges in practicing the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism, such as humanity, altruism, daily relevance, joy, timeliness, and universality, and that these challenges are associated with factors such as religious education, local temple support, and societal attitudes. To test this, these challenges are operationalized into measurable variables: institutional barriers are measured by the reported lack of temple programs aligned with Humanistic values; social resistance is assessed through perceived community acceptance using Likert-scale survey items; and personal challenges are evaluated by the self-reported difficulty in applying Humanistic principles in daily routines. Additional variables include the frequency of exposure to Humanistic teachings, participation in temple-led initiatives, and demographic factors such as age, education, and region. These considerations naturally

lead to the formulation of a hypothesis that seeks to address the core issues raised in the previous section.

Hypothesis:

H3: Thai Buddhists face specific social, institutional, and personal challenges in practicing the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism

Research question 3:

What challenges do Thai Buddhists encounter in practicing the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism?

These research questions and hypotheses provide the conceptual foundation for investigating how Humanistic Buddhism manifests in contemporary Thai society. By linking the doctrinal principles with lived practices, and examining both the enabling and constraining factors, this study moves toward a methodological framework designed to capture these complex dynamics.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-method approach, conducted over one year from August 2022 to July 2023. The collection of quantitative data involved distributing questionnaires to 400 respondents across two locations in Thailand—Fo Guang Shan and the Tzu Chi Foundation in Bangkok. This approach aimed to capture the diversity of Buddhist practices within the largest Buddhist community in the country. The questionnaire was crafted considering three dimensions of Humanistic Buddhism (individual, universal, and Transcendental Humanism) and six defining traits of Humanistic Buddhism (humanity, emphasis on daily life, altruism, excitement, timeliness, and universality).

Additionally, qualitative data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with 30 participants from a diverse range of Buddhist communities, encompassing monks, regular practitioners, and community leaders. This interview seeks to investigate individual experiences and obstacles encountered when practicing Humanistic Buddhism. Participants were selected for the interviews due to their active engagement in Buddhist activities, guaranteeing that their perspectives represent authentic experiences within Humanistic Buddhism. This qualitative data

will offer a comprehensive view of the challenges encountered in this tradition, which will subsequently be examined through thematic codes to uncover the primary patterns and themes.

Participants

There were 400 participants in this investigation. The selection of participants followed a purposive sampling method, targeting individuals who are actively engaged in Buddhist practices and institutions that emphasize Humanistic Buddhism. The distribution of respondents is based on the location, region, the cultural and religious influence of selected Buddhist institutions in Thailand, gender, and age. The demographic profile of the respondents includes a balanced gender distribution and diverse age groups. The participants ranged from 20 to 65 years old, with an average age of approximately 37. This diversity enabled a broader understanding of how humanistic Buddhist values were perceived and practiced in different life stages and gender identities. Table 1 explains the sample distribution.

Table 1. Sample distribution

Location	Region	Cultural and Religious Significance	Respondent	Gender (M/F)	Age range
Fo Guang Shan	Bangkok (Central Thailand)	The political and cultural heart of Thailand, a major center for Theravāda Buddhism	250	110/140	20-65
Branches of The Tzu Chi Foundation	Bangkok (Central Thailand)	A strong historical Buddhist presence, a major center for Theravāda Buddhism	150	60/90	22-60

Additionally, 30 respondents participated in the interview activities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the obstacles associated with the practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand. Table 2 provides the distribution of the interview sample.

Table 2. Distribution of the interview sample

Region	Location	Cultural and Religious Significance	Number of respondents	Gender (M/F)	Age range	Interview Duration (minutes)
WBangkok (Central Thailand)	Fo Guang Shan	The political and cultural heart of Thailand, a major center for Theravāda Buddhism	18	9/9	30-60	30 – 55 (avg: 42 min)
	Branches of The Tzu Chi Foundation	A strong historical Buddhist presence, a major center for Theravāda Buddhism	12	5/7	28-57	28-60 (avg: 48 min)

Instruments

Questionnaire

The researchers have developed a questionnaire to investigate Buddhist beliefs and practices within Humanistic Buddhism. This instrument is based on the fundamental theory of Humanistic Buddhism, which includes key principles such as Universality, Transcendental Humanism, Universal Humanism, Joyfulness, Timeliness, and Humanity, as well as Emphasis on Daily Life and Altruism. It is designed to clarify the aspects of Buddhist teachings that emphasize the attainment of lofty spirituality, moral development, and human welfare in ordinary life. The dimensions and characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism and Local Patronage are each reflected in the 35 items that constitute this questionnaire, which are categorized into multiple sections. An explication of the 35 questions included in this questionnaire is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Items in the questionnaire

Aspect	Characteristics	Number of items	Example statement
Individual Humanism	Humanity, Emphasis on Daily Life, Altruism	10 items	"I integrate Buddhist principles into my daily life" (Daily Life)
Universal Humanism	Humanity, Altruism, Joyfulness	10 items	"I believe Buddhist teachings can help build a compassionate society" (Humanity)
Transcendental Humanism	Joyfulness, Timeliness, Universality	10 items	"I experience inner peace through meditation" (Joyfulness), "Buddhism remains relevant in modern times" (Timeliness)
Local patronage	Political and funding	5 items	

The researcher subsequently conducted a focus group discussion and consulted experts in Buddhism studies to ensure that the questionnaires developed were pertinent to the context of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand. Following the preparation of the questionnaire, a pilot test was implemented to guarantee the instrument's reliability and validity. This test included soliciting feedback from the Buddhist adherents who were the focus of the respondents.

Semi-Structured Interview

This interview instrument encompassed the three aspects of Humanistic Buddhism: Individual, Universal, and Transcendental Humanism, and was structured around the six characteristics (Humanity, Emphasis on Daily Life, Altruism, Joyfulness, Timeliness, and Universality), featuring 15 open-ended questions. The following is a detailed enumeration of these fifteen questions: 1) the individual dimensions of Humanism include four inquiries, 2) the universal dimensions of Humanism include four inquiries, 3) the aspects of Transcendental Humanism include four inquiries, and 4) there are three inquiries aimed at exploring challenges within the practice of Humanistic Buddhism.

Theoretical Framework for Instrument Design

Items measuring Universal and Transcendental Humanistic Buddhist beliefs and practices (Tables 5 and 6) were formulated based on classical Buddhist ethics and soteriology. Universal Humanism reflected Bodhisattva values such as *mahākaruṇā* (great compassion), *mettā* (compassion), and social connectedness, as emphasized by Hsing Yun and discussed by David W. Chappel,[35] Sallie B. King,[36] and Jian Chen.[37]

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[35] David W Chappell, "Buddhist Social Principles," in *Psychology and Buddhism: From Individual to Global Community*, ed. Kathleen H. Dockett, G. Rita Dudley-Grant and C. Peter Bankart (New York: Springer, 2003), 259–74, https://doi.org/10.1007/b105375.

[36] King, "Socially Engaged Buddhism."

[37] Chen, "Humanistic Buddhism: Plurality and Humanistic Buddhism in the Context of a Buddho-Christian Comparison."

Statements such as "I practice empathy…" and "The Buddha's teachings help people live harmoniously…" represent how these values are internalized in everyday life. Transcendental Humanism, meanwhile, is based on the concepts of the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*), the Noble Eightfold Path, and the attainment of nirvāṇa, integrating Theravāda and Mahāyāna perspectives.[38] Items such as "The main purpose of life is to transcend suffering…" and "I experience happiness through meditation…" reflect the aspiration for liberation as a lived spiritual practice.

Table 7 discusses Local Patronage, which was based on studies of the sociology of religion, specifically state-religion relations and institutional support in the Southeast Asian region.[39] The items in this section were designed to assess the perceptions of the government's involvement in supporting the sustainability of Buddhist practice, through policy support, funding, and cultural recognition. For example, statements such as "Government programs have a positive impact on my community" and "Political leaders support the integration of Buddhist teachings into public policy" operationalize how structural patronage influences the public role of Humanistic Buddhism. Overall, this instrument bridged doctrinal values with attitudes and behaviors that could be measured in the sociocultural context of Thailand.

Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis was performed to investigate the data gathered from the questionnaire regarding the beliefs and practices of Humanistic Buddhism. The study emphasized descriptive statistics to summarize and outline the key features of the data, specifically concentrating on the three aspects of Humanistic Buddhism (Individual, Universal, and Transcendental Humanism) and the six characteristics

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[38] Jay L. Garfield, "Buddhism and Modernity," in *The Buddhist World*, ed. John Powers (Routledge, 2015), 294–304, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688114; Shi, "The Path to Liberation."

[39] Ashiwa, "Positioning Religion in Modernity"; Tomas Larsson, "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion: Evidence from Thailand," *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 4 (2019): 576–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118770178.

(timeliness and universality). The information gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 32.0. Responses from each participant were systematically coded to the questions about the three aspects of Humanistic Buddhism and the six characteristics. For each question in the questionnaire, responses were assigned numerical values (for example, on a Likert Scale from 1 to 5), representing levels of agreement or the frequency of the practices. The examination was carried out for each of the three dimensions of Humanistic Buddhism (Individual, Universal, and Transcendental Humanism) along with the six defining characteristics:

- Individual Humanism: assessing beliefs and practices emphasizing personal development, self-agency, and unique spiritual practices.
- Universal Humanism: emphasizing the Interconnectedness of All Beings, Compassion for Others, and the Wider Societal Impact of Buddhism.
- Transcendental Humanism: Focusing on Spiritual Enlightenment, Moving Beyond Material Concerns, and Reaching an Elevated State of Awareness.

Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 participants were analyzed using qualitative methods. This qualitative methodology was designed to comprehensively examine the respondents' beliefs and practices about Humanistic Buddhism, with a particular emphasis on identifying any obstacles they encounter when seeking to implement its principles. The analysis also examined the consistency between beliefs and practices, as well as identified emerging challenges in the lived experience of Humanistic Buddhism, by comparing the results of the questionnaire with the responses from the interviews.

Result

RQ 1: *How do Thai Buddhists conceptualize and practice the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism in their daily religious and social lives?*

The results of the questionnaire distributed to 400 Buddhists across Thailand about their beliefs and practices in Humanistic Buddhism, which includes three aspects, namely 1) individual humanistic,

2) universal humanistic, and 3) transcendental humanistic, which also accommodates the six characteristics of Humanistic Buddhism, namely Humanity, Emphasis on Daily Life, Altruism, Joyfulness, Timeliness, and Universality.

The respondents have high confidence in the first aspect, and the average score for each item is above 4.00 (Table 4). The highest measurement indicator in the first is related to meditation, which is believed to be an essential component for respondents. The 3rd statement, "Meditation is essential to my spiritual growth and self-reflection", with an average score of 4.6, reflects the importance of meditation as the core of Buddhist practices that help individuals understand themselves and achieve spiritual transformation. Then, the item "I believe that the practice of Buddhism is integral to my overall well-being" shows that the respondents believe Buddhism is central to the whole peace. This belief is supported by the practice stated in the item "I take personal responsibility for my actions and their consequences, in line with Buddhist teaching," which gets the second-highest average score of 4.5, showing that each individual is responsible for each of their actions under Buddhist teachings.

Furthermore, in the second aspect, Universal Humanism, which indicates the respondent's award for the universal principle of humanitarianism in Buddhism, each measurement item has an average score above 4.00 (Table 5). In this second aspect, there are two items with the highest score (4.7), namely "I like how Buddhists encourage people to become friends," and "I think Buddhist teachings can help people live harmoniously, regardless of their background." This shows the strong belief of the respondents that the teachings of Buddhism, such as the concept of mettā (universal love), are widely accepted as an approach that supports friendship and harmony.

The item with the second-highest average score is "I think Buddhist teachings can help people live harmoniously, regardless of their background," with a score of 4.6. Buddhist teachings are often translated into daily life practices that support social tolerance and harmony. Furthermore, the item with the lowest average score, but still above 4.00, is "Every person has the right to find happiness and achieve their full potential regardless of belief." Also, "I practice empathy by trying to

Table 4. Individual Humanistic Buddhist beliefs and practices

No	Item statement	*Mean*	SD
1	I treat others with kindness.	4.1	1.08
2	I integrate Buddhist principles into my daily life.	4.0	1.22
3	Meditation is essential to my spiritual growth and self-reflection.	4.6	0.0625
4	I try to act with awareness and mindfulness in all areas of my life.	4.2	1.11
5	I take personal responsibility for my actions and their consequences, in line with Buddhist teachings.	4.5	1.15
6	My Buddhist practice helps me manage my emotions and thoughts.	4.4	1.12
7	I aim to cultivate a compassionate mindset toward myself and others through Buddhism.	4.3	0.99
8	The teachings of Buddhism have helped me understand the nature of suffering in my life.	4.1	1.01
9	My Buddhist practices have made me more patient and tolerant.	4.0	1.03
10	The practice of Buddhism is integral to my overall well-being.	4.5	0.89

Table 5. Universal Humanistic Buddhist beliefs and practice

No	Item statement	*Mean*	SD
1	I like how Buddhists encourage people to become friends.	4.7	1.002
2	We must give support to people experiencing poverty and the needy.	4.4	1.12
3	It is important to promote social harmony and peace among all people.	4.5	0.98
4	My Buddhist beliefs encourage me to help those who are suffering in society.	4.6	1.23
5	Every person has the right to find happiness and achieve their full potential regardless of belief.	4.2	1.31
6	People who have helped us a lot deserve our special respect.	4,35	0.89
7	Buddhist teachings can help people live harmoniously, regardless of their background.	4.7	0.97
8	I respect Buddhists for giving food and money to their monks.	4.25	1.2
9	I practice empathy by trying to understand others' feelings and perspectives.	4.2	1.24
10	I admire Buddhists for respecting all living things.	4.3	1.11

understand others' feelings and perspectives." Although high, this score shows that universal empathy and justice may require further reinforcement in daily life, especially in communities that are less exposed to the values of pluralism. However, in ten items that measure aspects of Universal Humanism, there are items that several respondents give a score of 1, namely "I Admire Buddhists for Respecting All Living Things," although the average score for this item is still high at 4.3. This shows the existence of disparity in understanding or appreciating the universal value of Buddhism.

The third aspect is Transcendental Humanism. Out of the ten items assessing this aspect, eight achieved an average score exceeding 4.00 (Table 6), reflecting a strong appreciation for Buddhist teachings aimed at profound spiritual objectives. Nonetheless, one item received an average score below 4.00, indicating difficulties in implementing specific practices. Among the eight items that received an average score exceeding 4.00, the item with the highest average score is "I experienced deep satisfaction and joy through prayer or meditation," which boasts an average score of 4.6. Buddhist meditation and prayer practices are crucial in helping individuals attain inner peace and profound happiness. According to Gethin (1998), meditation is the primary component of Buddhism, and it aids individuals in transcending suffering and fostering inner understanding. Then, the statement "The ultimate goal of life is to transcend suffering and achieve enlightenment" received an average score of 4.5. This finding illustrates the respondents' comprehension of the fundamental principles of Buddhist teachings, specifically the endeavor to transcend suffering (dukkha) in pursuit of enlightenment (nirvana). One item received an average score of less than 4.00, specifically "I believe that the pursuit of wisdom and compassion can lead to transcendence." While this score remains near 4.00, it indicates that certain respondents might encounter difficulties comprehending or incorporating the idea of wisdom and compassion to achieve practical transcendence in their lives.

Table 6. Transcendental Humanistic Buddhist beliefs and practice

No	Item statement	*Mean*	SD
1	The ultimate goal of life is to transcend suffering and achieve enlightenment.	4.5	1.12
2	Spending time meditating is a constructive use of one's time.	4.1	1.15
3	Buddhists should not kill any animal.	4	1.16
4	I experienced deep satisfaction and joy through prayer or meditation.	4.6	1.21
5	The Eightfold Path seems a good way to achieve happiness.	4.2	1.23
6	Spiritual awakening leads to a deeper understanding of the universe.	4.2	0.99
7	I find inner strength and/or peace in my prayers or meditations.	4.1	0.98
8	I regularly engage in rituals or ceremonies as part of my spiritual growth.	4.1	1.09
9	I feel deeply connected with the Buddha's teachings on the nature of existence.	4.4	1.07
10	The pursuit of wisdom and compassion can lead to transcendence.	3.9	1.2

RQ 2: *How does local patronage influence the development and sustained practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand?*

Local patronage in Humanistic Buddhism is investigated through five specific statement items. The five statement items exhibit strong performance, with four items achieving an average score exceeding 4.00 (Table 7), while one item records an average score of 3.7. Among the five items, the third item, "I am aware of how government funding is allocated to promote Buddhist cultural events," received the highest average score of 4.6. The item "Government Programs to Support Buddhist Practices Have Positively Impacted My Community" received the second-highest average score of 4.5. One item that gets an average score below 4.00 is "Political Leaders Actively Advocate for the Integration of Buddhist Teachings in Public Policies," with an average score of 3.7. The findings indicate that respondents generally exhibit lower levels of agreement regarding the role of political leaders in incorporating Buddhist teachings into public policies.

Table 7. Local Patronage in Humanistic Buddhism

No	Item statement	*N*	*Mean*	SD
1	I believe government funding helps preserve Buddhist temples and infrastructure.	400	4.2	1.11
2	Government programs to support Buddhist practices have positively impacted my community.	400	4.5	1.12
3	I am aware of how government funding is allocated to promote Buddhist cultural events.	400	4.6	0.98
4	The government's political stance reinforces the role of Buddhism as a national identity.	400	4	0.78
5	Political leaders actively advocate for the integration of Buddhist teachings into public policies.	400	3.7	1.09

The quantitative findings are corroborated by the interviews conducted with respondents, where the aspect of government funding and the budget for policy implementation emerged as the most significant factor cited by participants about the local patronage model within Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand. The participants emphasized that government backing, through direct financial assistance and budget allocations for policy execution, was crucial for maintaining the ongoing success of the Humanistic Buddhism program. This program encompasses religious education, skills training, and social welfare initiatives tailored to the community's needs. For instance, certain respondents indicate that the availability of government funding for temple activities not only enhances public access to Buddhism-related services but also reinforces the temple's role as a hub for social activities.

RQ 3: *What challenges do Thai Buddhists encounter in practicing the core principles of Humanistic Buddhism?*

According to the findings from interviews with 30 participants, the primary challenges identified in the practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand include 'Overcoming Internal Struggles,' 'Cultivating Compassion in Relationships,' and 'Managing Existential Understanding.' This analysis addresses the inquiry "What are the Key

Challenges that Humanistic Buddhism Encounters in Thailand?" by outlining three interconnected dimensions of challenges:

- Addressing Personal Challenges. This challenge pertains to individuals confronting internal conflicts, particularly the disparity between spiritual and material needs. Participants indicate that contemporary ways of living, frequently prioritizing materialistic values, pose challenges for numerous individuals when applying Buddhist principles in their daily lives. Furthermore, the rise of digital distractions and the absence of thorough reflection hinder the individuals' capacity to fully internalize Buddhism's teachings as a comprehensive system.
- Fostering Empathy in Connections. In the social context, participants indicated that establishing and sustaining affectionate relationships poses a significant challenge, particularly amid rising social pressures and the fragmentation of communities. Numerous individuals struggle to maintain consistent compassion in social interactions, influenced by varying cultural values, heightened economic competition, and insufficient community support. This highlights the necessity for a more nuanced approach to enhance the values of compassion in contemporary society.
- Overseeing the Comprehension of Existence. This challenge pertains to the complexities involved in comprehending and grasping the fundamental principles of Buddhism concerning life, suffering, and existence. Participants indicated that Buddhist education frequently remains overly dogmatic, which complicates the connection between the existential ideas of Buddhism and the actual experiences of contemporary society. This leads numerous individuals to perceive these teachings as less applicable to their life challenges, including economic instability, societal transformation, and environmental issues.

Discussion

The Conceptualization and Practice of the Core Principles of Humanistic Buddhism

The results of the initial inquiry emphasized the respondent's beliefs and practices concerning three aspects of Humanistic Buddhism: individual humanistic, universal humanistic, and transcendental humanistic. Regarding the individual humanistic perspective, participants perceive meditation as a crucial element in attaining peace. They consistently incorporate Buddhist principles into their daily routines and strive to engage in all aspects of their lives with awareness and mindfulness. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Catherine N. M. Ortner, Sachne J. Kilner and Philip David Zelazo,[40] which indicates that meditation significantly contributes to developing individual emotional and spiritual balance while also enhancing the capacity to manage the pressures of contemporary life by fostering mindfulness as both a cognitive and an emotional skill. The findings indicate that individuals who regularly engage in meditation demonstrate a greater capacity to confront life's challenges with a composed and introspective mindset, aligning closely with the fundamental principles of Humanistic Buddhism. This finding aligns well with the studies conducted by Kamlesh Singh, Kamalpreet Kaur Sohi, Harshmeet Kaur, and Purnima Singh,[41] which investigate the impact of meditation on enhancing well-being and life satisfaction. This study demonstrates that meditation enhances individuals' ability to comprehend and embrace suffering while fostering empathy and strengthening connections with others. This finding is significant for participants who highlight that engaging with awareness and mindfulness enables them to promote healthier social connections and enhance community harmony.

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[40] Catherine N. M. Ortner, Sachne J. Kilner, and Philip David Zelazo, "Mindfulness Meditation and Reduced Emotional Interference on a Cognitive Task," *Motivation and Emotion* 31 (2007): 271–83, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-007-9076-7.

[41] Singh et al., "Buddhism and Its Contribution to Positive Psychology."

Prior studies corroborate this finding, including the work of Anran Chen and Yue Tang,[42] which indicates that incorporating meditation into mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) practices aids individuals in managing stress while enhancing cognitive and emotional flexibility in daily life. The investigation revealed that meditation emphasizing complete awareness can improve the individuals' capacity to confront life's challenges more constructively, particularly within the framework of intricate urbanization and globalization. In Thailand, meditation linked to Humanistic Buddhism encompasses a profound aspect, focusing on spiritual integration that seeks individual well-being and enhances social connections and contributions to local communities. This finding emphasizes that meditation is a tool for self-improvement and a link that aligns individual values with shared interests, thereby rendering Humanistic Buddhism significant in contemporary society. Nonetheless, this discovery should also be contrasted with the work of Qiang Xie and colleagues,[43] which emphasizes the difficulties associated with practicing meditation in contemporary society. The study indicated that numerous individuals struggle to dedicate time consistently to meditation due to the demands of work and the escalating intensity of digital life.

Additionally, the second finding from the initial inquiry pertains to universal elements of humanistic principles. Participants indicated strong convictions and behaviors that aligned with universal humanistic principles. They appreciate how Buddhists promote friendship and believe that Buddhist teachings can assist individuals in living harmoniously, irrespective of their backgrounds. Participants indicated a consistent application of empathy by making efforts to comprehend the feelings and perspectives of others. This finding aligns with the work of David W. Chappell,[44] which demonstrates that the teachings

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[42] Anran Chen and Yue Tang, "Exploring the Facilitating Environment for Mindfulness Meditation: Establishing a Framework through Analysis of Means and Exploratory Factor Analysis," *Mindfulness* 15, no. 10 (2024): 2519–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02442-2.

[43] Qiang Xie et al., "Understanding the Implementation of Informal Meditation Practice in a Smartphone-Based Intervention: A Qualitative Analysis," *Mindfulness* 15, no. 2 (2024): 479–90, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02304-x.

[44] Chappell, "Buddhist Social Principles."

of Buddhism, particularly the concepts of mettā (affection) and karuṇā (compassion), can enhance interpersonal relationships, promote acceptance, and inspire individuals to coexist more harmoniously, irrespective of their social or cultural differences. Tan posits that these values foster social cohesion within a diverse community. This finding also aligns with the results of the study conducted by Linda Jane Douglas,[45] which indicates that the teachings of Buddhism regarding equality and empathy contribute to enhancing mutual respect within a diverse society. The study revealed that individuals who engage with the principles of Buddhism are generally more receptive to differences and demonstrate a greater commitment to fostering diversity across various dimensions, including religion, race, and culture. Participants in the study indicated that empathy is not merely a passive attitude. Still, active behavior manifests in everyday social interactions, a quality also observed in the responses from individuals in Thailand.

This finding aligns with a study by David W. Chappel,[46] highlighting that Buddhist teachings, particularly the concepts of interdependence and shared humanity, robustly support universal humanistic values centered on understanding and appreciation for our common humanity. Bodhi posits that Buddhism not only imparts lessons on affection but also encourages individuals to perceive their connections with others without limitations, encompassing dimensions of religion, race, and social status. This perspective aligns closely with our findings, as participants consistently express the importance of empathy by striving to understand others' viewpoints. This principle enhances interpersonal relationships and fosters a more inclusive community. The results of studies conducted by Makiko Takeda[47] further support this finding, demonstrating that the teachings of Buddhism, which emphasize social harmony and the appreciation of diverse backgrounds, can enhance

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45 Douglas, "Ethical Underpinnings and Social Work."

46 Chappell, "Buddhist Social Principles."

47 Makiko Takeda, "Building Equality and Social Cohesion in Myanmar: Plurilingualism as a Platform for Establishing Peace Culture," in *Social Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand: Volume I: Social, Political and Ecological Perspectives*, ed. Chosein Yamahata, Donald M. Seekins and Makiko Takeda (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 29–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9616-2.

the social experience of individuals in a pluralistic society. Nonetheless, applying these values on a broader scale within an increasingly fragmented society still necessitates cooperative endeavors among religious and social institutions.

Nevertheless, this discovery must also be contrasted with the results from the research conducted by Michael A. Pirson and Paul R. Lawrence,[48] which indicates that while Buddhist teachings advocate for harmony and empathy, significant challenges arise in consistently applying these values within the complexities of social life. In certain environments, particularly in large urban areas characterized by significant social and economic disparities, the principles of equality and camaraderie can often be challenging to implement in tangible ways. This indicates that while there is a robust conviction in the universal principle of humanistic values, their implementation necessitates a more extensive social process, including education and social policies that facilitate the incorporation of these values into individuals' lives.

Additionally, the third finding from the initial inquiry concerning the transcendental dimension of humanistic principles indicates strong beliefs and a notably consistent practice. Participants stated that they felt profound satisfaction and joy through prayer or meditation. There is a belief that the ultimate aim of existence is to overcome suffering and attain enlightenment. They also indicated a consistent involvement in rituals or ceremonies as an aspect of spiritual development. This finding aligns closely with the work of Jay L. Garfield,[49] who discovered that meditation and prayer within the Buddhist tradition serve as methods for attaining inner peace and as tools for overcoming suffering. He articulated that attaining peace encompasses not just an internal journey but also possesses a transcendent aspect that enables individuals to detach from worldly concerns and reach a state of higher happiness, aligning closely with the core goals of Buddhism, specifically enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*).

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[48] Michael A. Pirson and Paul R. Lawrence, "Humanism in Business – Towards a Paradigm Shift?," *Journal of Business Ethics* 93 (2010): 553–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0239-1.

[49] Garfield, "Buddhism and Modernity."

This finding aligns closely with the study conducted by Shi,[50] which indicated that meditation and prayer within the Buddhist tradition serve as a pathway to attain inner peace and a method to alleviate suffering. They articulated that attaining peace not only encompasses an internal journey but also possesses a transcendent aspect that enables individuals to detach from worldly concerns and reach a state of elevated happiness, aligning closely with the core aims of Buddhism, particularly enlightenment (nirvāṇa). However, as noted by James Gould,[51] despite reporting deep happiness and satisfaction from meditation and ritual practices, many people struggle to maintain consistency in their spiritual practice amidst a fast-paced and disruptive life. External factors, including professional and social obligations, frequently impede the depth and consistency of their spiritual endeavors. This indicates that while there is a profound conviction in the inherent value of Buddhist teachings, the practicalities of everyday existence can pose a significant challenge to attaining higher spiritual goals.

The Influence of Local Patronage on the Development of Humanistic Buddhism

The findings demonstrated that there is a clear understanding of the government's allocation of funding specifically aimed at promoting Buddhist cultural events. They acknowledged that government programs designed to support Buddhist practices have made a positive impact on their communities. Beyond financial support, respondents emphasized the broader social benefits generated by these initiatives, highlighting improvements in community cohesion and cultural preservation. This finding aligns with previous research by Phramaha Danai Srichan and colleagues,[52] who documented the Thai government's

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50 Shi, "The Path to Liberation."

51 James Gould, "Becoming Good: The Role of Spiritual Practice," *Philosophical Practice* 1, no. 3 (2005): 135–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/17428170600595846.

52 Phramaha Danai Srichan et al., "The Soft Power of Buddhism: Fostering Social Harmony and Cultural Identity in Thai Society," *The Journal of International Buddhist Studies College (JIBSC)* 10, no. 1–2 (2024): 301–19, https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/ibsc/article/view/280168.

active role in funding and endorsing various religious and Buddhist cultural activities. According to this scholarship, the government views Buddhism not only as a significant component of the nation's cultural heritage but also as a vital instrument for fostering social harmony and reinforcing a shared national identity. Within this framework, government-sponsored programs supporting Buddhist practices are instrumental in strengthening social structures and nurturing interpersonal relationships among community members—an outcome reflected in the positive perceptions reported by respondents in the present study.

Moreover, this finding was corroborated by Tomas Larsson's study,[53] which indicated that government policies promoting Buddhist events enhance society's spiritual experience and reinforce social connections within the community. Larsson emphasizes that these programs not only prioritize the preservation of culture but also the advancement of sustainable social development by fostering spiritual awareness and mutual care within the community. This illustrates a mutual connection between governmental assistance and Buddhist traditions that enhance the community's social and spiritual well-being.

Data from local patronage in Thailand demonstrates how political systems and ideological conflicts influence government spending on spiritual patronage. In Bangkok, it has been observed that democratic governments typically allocate greater financial resources to religious initiatives than their autocratic counterparts, with electoral competition playing a crucial role in shaping religious patronage. This largely arises because electoral competition drives politicians to meet their constituents' material and spiritual expectations. This clarifies, at least in part, the notable increases in government spending on religious issues that frequently occur when lawmakers take control of public expenditure decisions from authoritarian governments (and their technocratic allies). While it is expected that autocratic leaders will act as proponents of Buddhism, the difficulties they face often appear less severe. As a result, there is usually a noticeable inclination to decrease the funding designated for religious support, particularly following an increase implemented by their predecessors elected by popular vote.

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[53] Larsson, "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion."

Autocratic political leaders might understand the significance of acting as patrons of Buddhism to attain legitimate religious authority. However, religiously inclined Thai autocrats, like the absolute monarchs of the past, would be motivated to direct their religious patronage toward the geographic and symbolic epicenter of the polity as far as they are able. Unlike democratic parliaments, autocrats require less widespread public support, resulting in diminished incentives to systematically extend their religious patronage to village temples nationwide. Autocratic regimes necessitate the support, or at least the passive acceptance, of communal elites at the national level. In the context of Thailand, this includes the monarchy and the senior Sangha hierarchs in Bangkok. Gaining their favor necessitates ritual demonstrations of loyalty and submission, consistent with royalist interpretations of Thai nationalism, yet does not involve excessive expenditure on religious bureaucracy. Historically, the military has served as defenders of 'nation, religion, and king,' leading Thai military autocrats to view the legitimacy of their royally endorsed rule with significant confidence. In contrast to parliamentarians, they have not been required to secure the support of the broader monkhood to the same degree.

The Challenges of Humanistic Buddhism Practices in Social Lives

The findings from the third research question underscore the challenges encountered by Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand. Interviews with 30 respondents identified three main obstacles to practicing Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand: 1) overcoming internal struggles; 2) cultivating compassion in relationships; and 3) managing existential issues. The initial challenge, addressing internal struggles, involves inner conflicts related to emotions such as anger, greed, and hatred. Participants reported that, although they wished to follow Buddhist principles, they often faced challenges from negative emotions and worldly desires that were difficult to control. This finding corresponds with Naranjo's research,[54] which emphasizes the considerable challenges

[54] Claudio Naranjo, *The Revolution We Expected: Cultivating a New Politics of Consciousness* (Berkeley, CA: Gateways Books, 2018).

facing Humanistic Buddhism in dismantling entrenched cognitive patterns and negative emotions in individuals. Naranjo stated that self-control in Buddhism requires ongoing practice and patience, as well as an educational process to recognize and overcome feelings of anger, anxiety, and greed. In Thailand, individuals face considerable challenges in improving their mental quality through meditation and awareness cultivation, as this practice requires sustained discipline and extended effort.

Furthermore, the second challenge pertains to developing compassion within interpersonal relationships. Respondents report that this principle is difficult to apply in everyday interactions, particularly in complex family or community dynamics, despite Buddhism's emphasis on compassion (*karuṇā*).[55] offers evidence that compassion is a fundamental component of Buddhist teachings; however, its practical application in daily life frequently encounters substantial obstacles, particularly in relationships marked by emotional distress or conflict. Goleman and Davidson[56] argue that the development of profound empathy is necessary for the cultivation of authentic compassion, which allows individuals to comprehend the perspectives of others and cultivate a desire to alleviate their suffering. An individual's capacity to respond with empathy and sensitivity is frequently impeded by external factors, such as tension and social pressure, which present practical challenges in demonstrating compassion.

The third challenge, Managing Existential Understanding, is concerned with the understanding and acceptance of the inevitabilities of life, such as sickness, mortality, and uncertainty. Despite their knowledge of Buddhist teachings regarding Anicca (impermanence) and Dukkha (suffering), respondents reported difficulty integrating these concepts into their daily lives. According to Timo Ennen,[57] the challenges associated with understanding existential reality are closely

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[55] King, "Mindfulness, Compassion and Skillful Means in Engaged Buddhism."

[56] Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (New York: Avery, 2017).

[57] Timo Ennen, "The Self-Knowledge of Not-Self: On the Problem of Modern Buddhism and the Basic Character of the Buddha's Teaching," *The Journal of East Asian Philosophy*, 2024, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43493-024-00034-x.

related to the incapacity of individuals to embrace the inevitability of life events, such as mortality and suffering. Batchelor notes that even though Buddhism asserts suffering as an inherent aspect of human existence, individuals often attempt to avoid or deny it. Engaging in comprehensive spiritual practices, such as contemplation and meditation, is imperative to effectively navigate this existential awareness. At the same time, these practices allow individuals to maintain inner calm while embracing the acceptance of challenging life realities.

Conclusion

This investigation contributes significantly to Humanistic Buddhism by analyzing three critical components: the challenges it faces in its implementation, the influence of local patronage in supporting Buddhist beliefs and practices in Thailand, and the humanistic perspective associated with these practices.

This study investigates the beliefs and practices of Buddhism within Humanistic Buddhism, emphasizing three primary dimensions: individual humanistic, universal humanistic, and transcendental humanistic. The results suggest that practitioners demonstrate high confidence and consistency in their practices, including pursuing enlightenment as the ultimate life goal, compassion in social interactions, and meditation for inner calm. The respondents underscore the importance of meditation and awareness in their daily lives to achieve personal tranquility. The universal aspect of Humanism posits that Buddhist teachings can cultivate harmonious relationships among individuals, irrespective of their heritage, and improve empathy. Regarding the transcendental aspect of humanism, the respondents maintain that the primary objective of life is to transcend suffering and achieve enlightenment, primarily through meditation and rituals. This research investigates the role of local patronage in promoting Humanistic Buddhism, with a particular emphasis on the beneficial effects of government programs in Thailand that provide funding for Buddhist activities and cultural events. The respondents exhibited a high level of cognizance regarding allocating government funds for Buddhist activities. They indicated that this support positively impacted the reinforcement of Buddhist practices at the local

level. These programs reinforce societal human values and enhance interpersonal relationships, all while facilitating spiritual development. This study identifies three primary challenges in Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand: 1) overcoming internal struggles related to the management of negative emotions such as anger and greed, 2) cultivating compassion in social relationships, which are frequently impeded by tension and conflict, and 3) addressing existential understanding regarding the acceptance of suffering and the uncertainties of life. These obstacles demonstrate that, despite a fervent desire to integrate Buddhist teachings into daily life, such a practice requires continuous effort and in-depth contemplation.

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DILEME MED PROGRESIVNO IN KONSERVATIVNO MISLIJO: VIR KRIZE SODOBNE DRUŽBE

Igor Škamperle

Uvod

Sodobni svet se je, dobrih sto let po izidu znamenitega Spenglerjevega dela *Zaton Zahoda* (prvi del leta 1918, drugi del 1922, skupna končna izdaja je izšla 1923)[1], znašel v zapletenem stanju globalne preobrazbe, ki zajema tako rekoč vse sfere družbenega in biološkega življenja. Prispodoba zatona, ki ponazarja geografski položaj dežel zahodnjaške civilizacije kot kraja, kjer sonce zahaja, ter rastlinske oznake brstenja, rasti, zrelih plodov in odmrtja, ki po analogiji kažejo na zgodovinski cikel civilizacij, med katerimi naj bi po Spenglerju naša zahodnjaška bila v svoji zadnji fazi, več kot sto let spremlja evropsko kulturo. Zgodovino civilizacij in potencialno konfliktnost med njimi je v zadnjem času opisal Samuel P. Huntington v spornem eseju *Spopad civilizacij*.[2] Aplikacija cikla kot forme razvoja človeških kultur ter uporaba pojmov zatona ali dolgotrajne dekadence in končnega padca pogosto nastopata že v starejših filozofskih in zgodovinskih delih. Naj omenimo le pionirja poznejših modernih kulturno zgodovinskih študij, kot sta bila Giambattista Vico, ki je kritično zavrnil novoveško racionalno in mehanično znanost za razumevanje razvoja človeških kultur, in Edward Gibbon (1773–1794), s svojim znamenitim delom *The Decline and fall of the Roman empire*

[1] Oswald Spengler, *Zaton Zahoda I-II: Oris morfologije svetovne zgodovine* (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 2010).

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1996).

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(1788).[3] Precejšen odmev je imela tudi obsežna primerjalna študija, ki jo je opisal Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) in spada danes med klasična dela opisa svetovnih kultur.[4] Duhovnozgodovinske študije sicer nimajo jasno opredeljene metode, ker se ta nujno prilagaja vsakokratnim okoliščinam, oblikam razumevanja in ne nazadnje ideološkim potrebam svoje dobe.[5] Spreminja se tudi konceptualni aparat, s katerim poskušamo relevantno zajeti in opisati družbene strukture, njihove pojavne oblike in razvoj, kot tudi nikoli ustrezno in zadostno opredeljen odnos med posameznikom in družbenim kolektivom. Kljub temu so kulturnozgodovinske študije, ki posegajo na družbeno socialno raven in področje duha, ki opredeljuje posameznega človeka, lahko relevanten vpogled v resničnost neke dobe. Ne brez zadržanih pomislekov, seveda.

Spenglerjevo delo je ob izidu povzročilo veliko razburjenja. Ob tistih, ki so ga z zanimanjem pozdravili, je bilo več ideološko motiviranih kritik, zlasti s strani t. i. progresivnega toka, ki je knjigi očital reakcionarno naravnanost. György Lukacs jo je v spisu *Uničenje razuma* (1954) označil kar za predhodnico fašizma.[6] Spengler, do takrat malo znan šolski učitelj filozofije, je v delu povzel nekatere miselne izsledke Nietzschejeve kritike, jih povezal z občutjem svoje dobe ter od sociologa Tönniesa smiselno povzel pojma kulture (*Kultur*) in civilizacije (*Zivilisation*).[7] Medtem ko je kultura izvirno stanje razvoja neke skupnosti, ki deluje kot samostojen organizem in sledi svojemu razvojnemu ritmu, podobno kot biološki organizmi, ter daje s tem podlago za

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[3] Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and fall of the Roman empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1788).

[4] Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilisations on Trial* (Oxford, 1948). Del obsežne študije *A Study of History* (London, Oxford, 1934–1961).

[5] O gnoseološki problematiki historičnih študij in t. i. kulturni zgodovini je na voljo izčrpna strokovna literatura. Strnjen antologijski pregled zgodovinopisja, ki želi biti tudi »kulturološko poročilo«, podaja zbornik *Zgodovina historične misli. Od Homerja do začetka 21. stoletja*, ur. Oto Luthar, Marjeta Šašel Kos, Nada Grošelj, Gregor Pobežin (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2006), s prispevkoma Aleša Bunte in Igorja Grdine. Za teoretično analizo razumevanja časovne dobe se opiram na delo Reinhart Koselleck, *Pretekla prihodnost: Prispevki k semantiki zgodovinskih časov*, prev. Igor Kramberger, spremna beseda Oto Luthar (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 1999). Pojem kulturne zgodovine uporabljam v pomenu, kot ga je razvil Peter Burke. Glej njegovo delo Peter Burke, *Kaj je kulturna zgodovina* (Ljubljana: založba Sophia, 2007).

[6] Navedeno po: Carlo Bordoni, ur., *Il declino dell'Occidente revisited* (Milano in Udine: Mimesis Edizioni SRL, 2018), 8. Zbornik zajema prispevke številnih sodobnih avtorjev.

[7] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Skupnost in družba* (Ljubljana: FDV, 1999).

zgodovinsko morfologijo, je civilizacija le materialno tehnična pridobitev tega razvoja, ki se utrdi v sklepnem obdobju kulturne rasti ter napoveduje njegovo iztrošenje in konec. Vsaka kultura ustvarja svoj simbolni in duhovni svet, zato med njimi ni neposredne odvisnosti, ampak ima vsaka civilizacija svoj razvojni in duhovnozgodovinski cikel. Spengler nikakor ni bil edini, ki je v začetku 20. stol. izpovedal občutje nelagodja v takratni evropski družbi ter poskušal analizirati notranje vzroke za njeno dekadentno stanje in po mnenju številnih skorajšnji propad. Ob literarnih delih, ki so očitno poudarjala stanje človekove brezizhodnosti v čedalje težje razumljivem svetu ter so jih v teh letih napisali Franz Kafka (*Proces, Grad*), Thomas Mann (*Čarobna gora*), Georges Bernanos (*Pod Satanovim soncem*), Aldous Huxley, Mihail Bulgakov, L.-F. Céline in drugi, so preobrazbo moderne družbe izpovedovala tudi takratna slikarska in glasbena dela.[8] O tem, kako globoko so številni umetniki in izobraženci občutili tedanjo duhovno in družbeno krizo, dovolj zgovorno potrjuje dejstvo, da so nekateri med njimi odkrito podpirali vstop v vojno, ki naj bi prečistila odvečne dekadentne naplavine, prenovila duha in spet vzpostavila dostojen družbeni red. Nastop prve svetovne vojne so pozdravili filozof Max Scheler, sociolog Max Weber, pesnik D'Annunzio in še marsikdo. Umetniško gibanje italijanskega futurizma si je prizadevalo ustvariti novo moderno estetiko, ki je posredno navdihovala fašizem. Vizualna estetika, ki se je navdihovala ob boljševistični revoluciji, ni bila bistveno drugačna. Njun skupni imenovalec je v resnici vera v progresivni zanos, ki naj ustvari novega človeka in novo resničnost sveta.[9]

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[8] Zapleteno družbeno stanje in ostre umetniške izraze takratnega obdobja je analiziral Jacques Le Rider, *Dunajska moderna in kriza identitete* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 2017). Kot definicijo omenjenega stanja duha, ki jo v drugem delu razprave skušam uporabiti tudi za analizo pojma singularnosti, ki spremlja sodobno družba, naj navedem avtorjev stavek iz uvoda: »Kot odziv na občutke samote, krhkosti subjektivnega jaza, nestabilnosti notranjih identifikacij in fasadnih identitet se nekateri ustvarjalci na prelomu stoletja podajo v raziskovanje možnosti obnove identitete s pomočjo nečesa, kar bi lahko imenovali radikalizacija individualizma.« Avtor opredeljuje tri oblike – mistika, genija in narcisa. Nastopajo kot trije glavni tipi potrjevanja samozadostnosti individua, odrezanega od vsakršne človeške skupnosti, vase zaprtega ‚jaza', v neposrednem soočenju z resničnostjo sveta.« (Prav tam, 6.)

[9] Duhovne korenine, ki so motivirale in usmerjale boljševiško revolucijo v Rusiji, je dobro analiziral Nikolaj A. Berdjajev. V delu *Izviri in smisel ruskega komunizma* ni opozoril le na materialistično in nihilistično osnovo nosilcev prevrata, ampak tudi prepričljivo izpostavil

Zgodovinski kontekst

V obdobju med obema svetovnima vojnama so kritična zavest, občutje družbene utesnjenosti in progresivni nagib z željo po novi stvarnosti, v levem in desnem politično nazorskem taboru, dosegli svoj vrhunec. Posrečen emblem tega stanja je slika Paula Kleeja *Angelus novus* iz leta 1920. Umetnikov prijatelj Walter Benjamin to sliko, ki jo je odkupil in jo leta 1940 ob svojem pobegu pred nacisti iz zasedene Vichyjske Francije, med katerim je umrl, dal v varstvo Georgesu Bataillu, omenja v spisu *O pojmu zgodovine* (njegov zadnji spis). Sliko (IX. teza) interpretira, kot da gre za angela zgodovine, z vso dvoumnostjo, ki jo nakazuje podoba. Angel novosti zapušča ruševine starega sveta, vendar se hkrati ozira, kakor bi želel upočasniti svoj vzlet. Vihar novega pa se je »ujel v njegove peruti in je tako močen, da jih ne more več zložiti. Ta vihar ga nezadržno žene v prihodnost, ki ji obrača hrbet, medtem ko kup razvalin pred njim raste v nebo. Ta vihar je tisto, čemur pravimo napredek.«[10] Benjamin tu razvije kritiko »historičnega materializma« in postavi pod vprašaj golo stremljenje po novem. Trdi, da se novost gradi tako, da znamo ohraniti ter primerno povzeti in nadgraditi staro. V tem smislu je poskušal povzeti obe drži, progresivno, ki stremi po novem, ter konservativno, ki priznava preteklo in želi nadgraditi staro, ne da bi ga izbrisala.

Poleg omenjene dileme, ki zadeva razmerje med novim in starim in jo je izpostavil Benjamin, lahko razliko med progresivno in konservativno miselno držo opredelimo na osnovi razumevanja človekovih zmožnosti in vrednotenja: progresivna misel si prizadeva za enakopravnost in pravičnost, želi prekiniti in se odvezati od tradicionalnih družbenih norm, ki jih ocenjuje krivično. Zanikuje domnevno naravni red sveta, zagovarja brezmejne možnosti človeka in verjame, da je družbeno

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domnevno racionalni progresivni nagib, ki spremlja take radikalne posege v ustaljeni družbeni red. »Revolucionarni organizatorji hočejo vselej racionalizirati iracionalno stihijo revolucije, vendar ta ostaja njeno orodje. Lenin je bil skrajen racionalist, verjel je v možnost dokončne racionalizacije družbenega življenja.« (Nikolaj A. Berdjajev, *Izviri in smisel ruskega komunizma* (Ljubljana: založba Družina, 2018), 161).

10 Walter Benjamin, *Izbrani spisi* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis, 1998), 219.

ureditev mogoče graditi racionalno, izključno na osnovi človekovih odločitev. Njen ideal je sekularno eshatološki.

Konservativna miselna drža se zaveda človekovih omejitev, zato priznava avtoritativno načelo, ki je nadrejeno osebni volji posameznika in nastopa kot dolžnost, kar se strukturno lahko prenese na različne družbene entitete, od religioznega pojma Boga do dejavnikov družbene moči, avtoritete, vloge tradicije, vlog posameznih oseb, njihove odgovornosti, članov skupnosti in patriarhalne družine. K temu dodajmo, da se nujnost (*ananke*), ki je bila v antičnem mitu o Prometeju nadrejena tehniki, v novem veku umakne novim tehničnim zmožnostim, ki jih ima človek.[11]

V medvojnem obdobju je filozofsko mišljenje dolgotrajno zaznamovala Heideggerjeva misel, ki je razkrila, da v ozadju razsvetljenskega projekta, ki je bil in ostaja temeljni vir modernega družbenega napredka ter temelji na racionalni formalizaciji življenja, tiči nihilizem. Ta je implicitno prisoten v mišljenju zahodnjaškega človeka že od njegove vzpostavitve v antični Grčiji. Z razvojem novoveške subjektivnosti se je ta implicitni nihilizem še poglobil. To je tema, ki je močno zaznamovala sodobno filozofsko misel, njeni odmevi so bili in so še vedno močno prisotni in nadvse relevantni. Tudi v slovenskem prostoru je ta miselni uvid doživel več poglobljenih razprav.[12] Zahodnjaški človek je, predvsem s Platonom, njegova misel pa je zaznamovala, tako ali drugače, vso zahodnjaško filozofsko izročilo, bivajoči svet opredelil na osnovi neke svoje nadideje, ki je dojeta kot najvišje bivajoče (ideja dobrega, pojem boga, idealna družba), s tem pa se izvrši, kot je o tem pisal Heidegger, *pozaba biti*. Tiste biti, ki je temelj (vsega) bivajočega. Zaradi te pozabe biti je po Heideggerju Platonova ontološka postavitev v jedru nihilistična, kajti človek svet ocenjuje in vrednoti na osnovi svoje ideje. Taka interpretacija Platona je bila v sodobnih razpravah deležna tudi kritike, kajti Platon na več mestih opozarja, da najvišje Dobro ni na isti ontološki ravni kakor bivajoče, ampak je onkraj bitnosti oziroma onkraj

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[11] Ajshil, *Peržani*. *Vklenjeni Prometej* (Ljubljana: Družina, 2020), 514. Kot nujnost sta v antičnem mitu mišljena narava in njen ciklični razvoj.

[12] Med številnimi razpravami, ki so to problematiko pretresale in jo poskušale misliti na Slovenskem, naj navedem le temeljno delo filozofa Ivana Urbančiča, *Zgodovina nihilizma: od začetka do konca zgodovine filozofije* (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 2011).

bivajočega sveta.[13] Podobno opozarja Platon tudi v *Zakonih*, kjer trdi (*Zakoni* 903c), da ne nastajata narava in življenje zaradi človeka, ampak je človek tu zaradi vsega obstoječega.[14]

Antična ontološka in srednjeveška teocentrična misel sta imeli določen zadržek pred absolutizacijo človeka v svetu, ker ga presegata naravni svet in Bog stvarnik. Z nastopom novega veka, ko človek temeljno gotovost najde v sebi kot mislečem subjektu (Descartes), naravni svet pa je razumljen kot objekt, ki je človeku na razpolago, ali za spoznavanje (Descartes, Galilej in nova znanost) ali za upravljanje in spreminjanje (Francis Bacon, empirizem, kolonizacija sveta), pa lahko govorimo o subjektivizmu, ki se postavlja kot središče bivajočega. Vzpostavi se zorni kot »človeškega pogleda«, ko vsako stvar vidimo in ocenjujemo s človeškimi uporabnimi merili. V tem pogledu je filozofska kritika pozabe biti upravičena. Novoveški subjektivizem pa je pojem brezmejnosti, v srednjem veku pripisan božjemu načelu, prenesel nase. Tudi teološko opredeljena eshatološka vizija, ki jo na obči religiozni ravni povzema pojem odrešenja, v novem veku postopoma pridobiva sekularni značaj in se pretaplja v poskuse idealističnega ustvarjanja idealne družbe v zdajšnji družbeni realnosti oziroma v tukajšnjem svetu. Puščam ob strani, da je antropocentrizem, ki se je uveljavil v novem veku, v svojem jedru evropocentričen, to je omejen na videnje zahodnjaškega človeka.

Taka *forma mentis*, ki temelji na temeljnem nihilizmu, ni moderna novost, ampak je bila latentno že prisotna. Moderna doba in sodobna družba sta jo le močneje izpostavili, da se je pokazala v čisti obliki. Z uveljavitvijo tehnike, ki nastopa kot udejanjeni rezultat zahodnjaške racionalne misli in je v svojem jedru progresivno usmerjena, pa smo stopili, kot se zdi, v zadnjo dobo virtualne »zamenjave« sveta in ukinitev

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[13] Platon, *Država*, VI, 509b: »A vendar Dobro ni bitnost, ampak sega čez, še onkraj bitnosti, po svoji vzvišenosti in mogočnosti.« (Platon, *Zbrana dela IV.* (Ljubljana: Kud Logos, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 2009), 1159). Kritično oceno Heideggerjeve interpretacije z naslonitvijo na bogato izročilo apofatične misli podaja Gorazd Kocijančič, *Posredovanja* (Celje: Mohorjeva družba, 1996).

[14] Platon, *Zakoni* 903c: »Med te dele sodi tudi tvoj del, nesrečnik, del, ki se vedno ozira na vesolje, ko stremi k njemu, čeprav je nadvse majhen – tebi pa je glede vesolja ostalo prikrito, da se celotno nastajanje dogaja zaradi tega, da bi življenje vesolja imelo srečno bivanje: ne nastaja to zaradi tebe, ampak ti nastajaš zaradi vesolja.« (Platon, *Zbrana dela V*, prevod in spremna besedila Gorazd Kocijančič (Ljubljana: KUD Logos, 2009), 1556).

snovnih ovir, ki so doslej človeku preprečevale dvig na izčiščeno abstraktno raven. O tem se v sodobni filozofski in družboslovni misli intenzivno razpravlja.[15]

Prispodoba zatona zahodnjaške civilizacije, s katero smo začeli to razmišljanje, nam poleg omenjenega pristopa, ki se sprašuje o naravi zahodnjaške metafizike in njenih posledicah, prikliče še eno dilemo, ki je danes zaradi realne družbene planetarne krize potrebna razmisleka. Ta dilema zadeva v svojih manifestacijah družbeno pojavni svet in oblike njegove politične realizacije. Mislim na izbiro med progresivno in konservativno mislijo, ki smo jo izbrali za temo tega sestavka in spremlja moderne zahodnjaške družbe ter večinoma zaradi obče prevladujoče neoliberalne paradigme pogojuje naš vsakdanji svet. Vrednostno ideološka izbira, ki jo strnjeno povzemata navedena pojma – progresivno in konservativno, z vsemi mogočimi protislovji, sega daleč nazaj ter bi jo lahko pripisali že izvirnim oblikam kolektivnega življenja in razvoja skupnosti. V starejših oblikah so to področje zapolnjevale predvsem različne oblike kulturnega izročila in religiozne vsebine. Monoteistične religije so duhovnonazorski pogled obogatile s teološkim pojmom božjih obljub. Vpeljale so obliko linearnega in končnega usmerjenega dojemanja časa, ki temelji na konceptu božjega stvarjenja. To vzpostavi poudarjen zgodovinski pogled, ki je progresivno naravnan, kar je značilnost Zahoda. Pri tem imamo opraviti z implicitno motivacijo, ki se izraža kot posebna oblika pričakovanja poslednjega, tudi mesijanskega časa, ki pomeni izpolnitev božjih obljub. André La Cocque in Paul Ricoeur sta s podrobno eksegezo, prvi s teološkega, drugi s filozofskega izhodišča, v obsežni študiji pokazala, da je vsako dejanje biblijskega stvarjenja ter spremljajoči človekovi padci in svetne ovire, razlog za napoved prihodnosti in božjo obljubo.[16] V krščanstvu, izvirnemu grehu rečemo tudi »blažena krivda« (*felix culpa*), ker je bila s tem odprta pot za nastop sina

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[15] Med relevantnimi študijami naj navedem pionirski esej, ki po slogu in drznosti ostaja nepresežen: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulaker in simulacija: Popoln zločin* (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 1999). Baudrillard je to imenoval implozija resničnosti in horizont izginotja. (Prav tam, 231).

[16] Andre LaCocque in Paul Ricoeur, *Misliti Biblijo* (Ljubljana: Hieron, Nova revija, 2003). Temo vzpostavitve dogodka, ki opredeljuje prihodnost in jo naredi za – zgodovinsko – resnično, avtorja obravnavata v poglavju Misliti stvarjenje (prav tam, 58–105). »Začetek ni presežena preteklost, ampak je nenehno nadaljujoči se začetek.« (Prav tam, 104).

človekovega in Kristusovo odrešenje. Implicitno pa je s tem podana oblika progresivnega nazora, ki stremi k novemu, boljšemu in odrešenju. Razlika v primerjavi s sodobnim sekularnim progresivnim pogledom je seveda v tem, da so v religiozni perspektivi človekove svetne zmožnosti omejene. Božje obljube se v religioznem kontekstu (krščanstvo, islam) nanašajo na onstranski svet. Ob tem lahko navedemo, da antični grški svet take perspektive ne pozna. Avtorja pri tem navajata Gilsona in skupaj z njim trdita, da »nič v grški filozofiji ne bi moglo peljati v monoteizem, primerljiv s hebrejskim; ne Platon, ne Aristotel, ne stoiki, ne novoplatonisti niso predpostavljali obstoja edinega Boga, stvarnika vsega, kar je«.[17] Heziod v epu *Dela in dnevi* opiše celo regresivni razvoj narave ljudi, ki je iz prve, zlate dobe preko srebrne, bronaste dobe božanskih junakov do končne železne, v kateri živimo, vztrajno nazadovala. Ta je namreč najslabša in jo po volji bogov čaka propad, ko bodo »ljudem lasje že ob rojstvu siveli«.[18] Lahko dodamo, da smo na Zahodu vsi ne glede na veroizpoved otroci judovskokrščanske paradigme, tudi Marx, tudi Freud, tudi sodobni neoliberalizem. Staro je bilo slabo, treba je narediti »rez« (stopiti v analizo, opraviti terapijo, izpeljati revolucijo) in nastopilo bo boljše.

V osnovi, v duhovno nazorskem izviru, sta obe drži sicer različni, vendar komplementarni. Z nastopom novoveškega subjektivizma in postopno, vendar vztrajno sekularizacijo evropskega človeka, so mesijanska pričakovanja začeli nadomeščati tosvetni cilji. Ideja napredka je legitimirala številne osvajalne pohode in kolonizacijo, ki so jo izvajale nekatere zahodnjaške družbe. V politično opredeljeni obliki pa je izbiro med progresivno usmeritvijo in konservativno držo, ki v modernem političnem diskurzu načelno označujeta levico in desnico, leta 1789 zarisala francoska revolucija. Takrat je referenčno področje religije zelo odločno nadomestil laični koncept nacije. Kljub poskusom restavracije »starega režima« se je ta paradigma ohranila in latentno pogojevala evropsko družbeno področje v zadnjih dvesto letih. Bila pa je in tudi ostaja latentni vir političnega konflikta.

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17 Prav tam, 375.

18 Heziod, *Teogonija: Dela in dnevi* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2009), 110–181.

Za analizo evropskih družb so pomembni še nekateri zgodovinski datumi, ker so dolgoročno zaznamovali nadaljnji razvoj stare celine ter njen politični in duhovni horizont. To so leto 1648, ko je bil po dolgoletnih bojih in nemirih zaradi verskih razlogov sklenjen vestfalski mir, ki je z načelom »cuius regio, eius religio«, določal, da vladar ozemlja pogojuje veroizpoved prebivalcev. In leto 1683, ko so zahodnjaške krščanske enote pod vodstvom Jana III. Sobieskega, poljskega vladarja in uspešnega vojskovodje, premagale turško vojsko, ki je oblegala Dunaj. Otomanska osvajanja, ki so dotlej ogrožala Srednjo Evropo, so se s tem dokončno ustavila. Tudi ta zmaga je bila kot že nekatere pred njo (na primer bitka pri Lepantu, 1571) razumljena kot znamenje božje previdnosti. Rušilni potres, ki je leta 1755 prizadel Portugalsko ter s hudo nevihto (cunami) in požari, ki so sledili, skoraj uničil Lizbono (umrlo je od 30 do 40 tisoč ljudi), pa je pred ljudi postavil novo razmišljanje. Narava očitno nima previdnostnega značaja ter človek ne sme dopustiti, da ga naravne sile poljubno ogrožajo in poškodujejo. Poklican je, da družbeno usodo vzame v svoje roke.[19]

To se je ujemalo s takratno razsvetljensko miselnostjo, ki se je vse bolj usmerjala k laični družbi in avtonomnim odločitvam. V 18. stoletju sta se v Franciji in Angliji razvili prvi meščanski družbi, ki sta ob kolonializmu in z vpeljavo industrijske proizvodnje poskušali v praksi udejanjiti nekatere ideje in načela mislecev razsvetljenstva. Jedro tega je bila ideja, naj človek s svojo voljo in razumom poseže v naravni red stvari in ga pravičneje spremeni sebi v korist v fizičnem svetu in na družbeni ravni. Take ideje je že v pozni renesansi zagovarjal Francis Bacon. Racionalna misel sicer stalno spremlja človekovo spraševanje o svetu in življenju, z razsvetljenstvom pa je predmet takega razmisleka postal tudi način oblikovanja in upravljanja skupnosti, ki so ga na novo poskušali opredeliti misleci Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Adam Smith in drugi.

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[19] Spraševanje, ali zgodovino človeštva usmerja notranja dialektika duha, ki je usmerjena k višjemu cilju, ali gre za vsakokratno odprto zoperstavljanje različnih silnic, ki niso razumno določljive, je izjemno obsežna tema in jo tu lahko le bežno nakažemo. Če bi morali izbrati predstavnika za vsakega od obeh pogledov, lahko za optimistično vizijo samorazvoja duha omenimo Hegla, za pojmovanje odprtega področja nenehno spreminjajočih se oblik kulture in zgodovine pa Jacoba Burckhardta. Glej: Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichte Betrachtungen* (Milano: Mondadori, 1990).

Ker je francoska revolucija potekala z veliko več nasilja kot ameriška z bitko za neodvisnost, prizadela pa je celostno obliko življenja, dušila tradicionalno korporativno družbo in cehovsko ureditev in neposredno ogrožala Katoliško cerkev, sta se v Franciji jasneje izoblikovali nasprotujoči si nazorski in politični usmeritvi. Ti sta osnovne značilnosti ohranili tudi v 19. in 20. stol. Na splošno ju označujemo kot progresivno in konservativno usmeritev.

V takratnem kontekstu, ko še ne moremo govoriti o modernem liberalizmu, je prva nacionalno progresivna smer posamezne osebe in lokalno skupnost podrejala kolektivnemu ideološkemu interesu, »vmesne« civilne, cerkvene, cehovske in agrarne enote pa razumela kot oviro na poti do uveljavitve pravic in interesov svobodnih posameznikov na ravni nacije (države). Ta zato implicitno teži k centralizaciji. Ta nagib se je v polni obliki uveljavil v totalitarnih sistemih v 20. stol. Druga, konservativna, usmeritev, ki se je vzpostavila v 18. stoletju kot odgovor na revolucionarno vrenje, želi ohraniti prek izročila pridobljeno in utemeljeno hierarhijo med interesnimi dejavnostmi, poudarja status človeških in institucionalnih vlog, zagovarja in ščiti tradicionalne vrednote, kot so družina, spolna vloga posameznih oseb, cerkvene in socialne ustanove, zagovarja sosesko kot jedro lokalne skupnosti s krajevno upravo, sprejema vlogo obrtnih cehov in po Bogu dan naravni red. Progresivna usmeritev je poudarjeno etatistična, globalni državni projekt, ki ga legitimira določena ideologija, pa temelji na načelu svobodnih in enakopravnih državljanov, ki so formalno opredeljeni. V modernih družbah se je na tej osnovi razvila liberalna politična drža, ki privilegira formalni državni okvir, zagovarja individualno enakost in svobodo življenjskih izbir. Njihove razlike vrednostno poenoti. Konservativna drža se taki redukciji poklicnih in vrednostnih izbir upira, zagovarja pomen življenjskih posebnosti in vlog, idejno, vrednostno in statusno pluralnost, osebno izbiro interesnih dejavnosti in njihovo tradicionalno hierarhijo vrednot (vrednost poklica), hkrati pa, zavedajoč se moralne šibkosti in negotovosti človeške narave, priznava omejitve dela in zmožnosti ter sprejema tradicionalni hierarhični red in temu ustrezno avtoriteto. Ta se izraža v konkretnih osebnih in skupinskih vlogah, od patriarhalne družine do družbenih ustanov, Cerkve, kralja oziroma monarha.

V 19. in na začetku 20. stol. se je tema smerema pridružila socialistična družbena ideologija, ki je kmalu dobila tudi svojo krščansko socialno obliko. Heterogeni izrazi, prepletanje in konflikti med temi idejnimi in političnimi usmeritvami so zaznamovali evropske družbe skozi celotno 20. stol. Njihov medsebojni odnos je bil in ostaja latentno konflikten. Nanj je mogoče navezati večino družbenih nasprotij, ki spremljajo evropski in zahodnjaški model življenja. Tako krščansko socialno gibanje, podprto z okrožnico papeža Leona XIII. *Rerum novarum* iz leta 1891, namenjeno delavskemu vprašanju in novi družbeni stvarnosti,[20] ki sta jo zaznamovala industrijska proizvodnja in močno izkoriščanje delovne sile, kot socialistična usmeritev, podprta s prevratno naravnano marksistično ideologijo, sta bila v zagovoru nekaterih vrednot presenetljivo blizu konservativni drži. Obe usmeritvi, krščansko socialna in socialistična, sta jasno zavračali liberalno filozofijo, ki je zagovarjala individualizem in profitno naravnano storilnost, in se zaradi socialnih skrbi nagibali h korporativni družbi. Ločili pa sta se v ciljni naravnanosti, ki je v krščanski perspektivi osebna in transcendentna. Ameriški sociolog Robert Nisbet (1913–1997) je duhovito zapisal, da imajo tudi socialisti, podobno kot konservativci, svoj program »za vse čase«.[21] Individualni libertarci, čeprav zagovorniki svobodne države, pa se morajo sprijazniti s tem, da živijo »iz rok v usta«. Ta usmeritev je prevladala v sodobni neoliberalni paradigmi.

Sodobna družba

Politične programe in družbeno dinamiko, ki so se razvijali sledeč tem trem temeljnim usmeritvam ter zaradi družbenih interesnih in nacionalnih protislovij privedli do dveh svetovnih vojn v 20. stol., puščamo ob strani. Bolj nas zanima, kako se omenjena dilema, progresivno – konservativno, kaže v sodobni zahodnjaški družbi. V povojnih desetletjih, ki jih v sociologiji označujemo kot tri velika desetletja

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[20] Ob 90. obletnici *Rerum novarum* leta 1981 je papež Janez Pavel II. napisal *Okrožnico o človeškem delu* oz. »*Laborem exercens*« (Cerkveni dokumenti 13 (Ljubljana, 1981)).

[21] Robert Nisbet, *Conservativism: Dream and Reality* (New York, 1986). Delo naj bi kmalu izšlo v slovenskem prevodu.

družbenega razvoja (50., 60. in 70. leta 20. stol.), so predstavniki frankfurtske šole marksistični progresivni nagib, sprva omejen na historični materializem, vizijo razrešitve družbenih protislovij in analizo t. i. alienacije (odtujenost človeka od svojega dela), zaradi neuspeha v družbah t. i. realnega socializma, ki so izpeljale prehod iz kapitalizma v socialistično ekonomsko ureditev, niso pa zagotovile svobodnih oblik civilne družbe ter idejne in politične pluralnosti, preusmerili v analizo in zagovor večje avtonomije stranskih, alternativnih socialnih in kulturnih izbir, kot so pravice manjšin, svobodno razpolaganje z lastno identiteto in alternativne umetniške prakse. Razvili so kritiko ideologij in množične kulture, vse to v kontekstu široke emancipacije, ki naj omogoča razvoj demokratične družbe. Ta gibanja, ki jim je s progresivno usmeritvijo skupno predvsem zanikanje meja v produkciji in manifestacijah človeške eksistence, se v zadnjem, za orientacijo mu lahko rečemo »globalnem« obdobju, nenehno krepijo. V sodobnem svetu se ob tem kaže tudi vse večja potreba po novem, zrelejšem odnosu do okoljske problematike.

Pri tem želim opozoriti na nekatera nova protislovja in transformacije, ki so vredne kritičnega razmisleka, ker se v svojih posledicah obračajo proti načelni individualni svobodi, ki naj bi bila temeljno načelo modernega zahodnjaškega življenja in tudi progresivne misli. Že ob koncu druge svetovne vojne je avstrijsko-angleški mislec Karl Popper kot odgovor na pravkar premagani nacizem napisal spis, ki je še dolgo odmeval in zaznamoval zahodnoevropske družbe. To je bila obsežna knjiga *Odprta družba in njeni nasprotniki*.[22] Popper v njej kritizira historično obarvane filozofije z vizijo domnevnega napredka, od Platona do Hegla in Marxa. Do marksističnega pojmovanja revolucionarnega prevrata je bil zelo kritičen. V takih, v izhodišču progresivnih teorijah je videl implicitno težnjo k totalitarizmu. Zagovarjal je idejno odprto družbo, najboljšo ureditev, ki naj bi to omogočila, pa je videl v liberalni demokraciji. Ta naj bi omogočala postopni institucionalni napredek brez nasilja.

Danes lahko rečemo, da je Popper model odprte liberalne družbe idealiziral in ga postavljal kot nasprotje zaprtih družb, ki so jih pred

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[22] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

drugo svetovno vojno udejanjali ideje in državni sistemi fašizma, nacizma in stalinizma. Take – zaprte – so bile tudi razvojno »ustavljene« in močno korporativno naravnane monarhije, kot so bile predvojne Španija, Jugoslavija in Romunija. Popper je menil, da se v zaprtih družbah individualna kritična misel podreja kolektivni normi (ideologiji). To so, strukturno gledano, notranje meje in latentne skrajne možnosti konservativne drže, ki pa v takih skrajnih oblikah zanikuje samo sebe s tem, ko pravice osebe in skupnosti prenese z lokalne (subsidiarne) na državno ideološko raven. Pojem subsidiarnosti je za sodobno konservativno misel zelo pomemben. Subsidiarnost pomeni, da centralna oblast ne vlada vsej družbeni sferi, ampak pristojnosti prenaša, delegira, na nižje upravne ravni, ki so pristojne na svojih področjih. Sodobna progresivna neoliberalna paradigma pa tako stališče zavrača, ker ji bolj ustreza »odprta« globalna ideologija, ki posameznike podreja enotnemu merilu centralizirane (upravne, informativne) oblasti, lokalne avtonomije pa dojema kot oviro ali celo zanikanje individualnih pravic in svoboščin. Edino dopustno merilo v ekonomiji in pri življenjskih izbirah naj bi bil prosti trg. Skrajna elementa sta posameznik in (nevidna, deregulirana) država. Možnosti, da bi ta še koga »ščitila«, je tako vse manj. Paradoks sodobne neoliberalne družbe je torej očiten: moderna, načelno odprta družba nas je v resnici pripeljala v novo kletko. To je napovedal že Max Weber.

Sklep

Danes je zanimivo opazovati, kako se Popperjeve napovedi niso uresničile tako, kot si je sam, morda preveč naivno, predstavljal. S tehničnimi pridobitvami ter poudarjeno individualizacijo in »ekranizacijo« življenja se družbeni in kulturni kontekst nista razvila v smeri večje odprtosti, ampak prej nasprotno. Živimo v čedalje bolj zaprti družbi, ki jo zavezujejo ekonomski modeli neokapitalizma velikih korporacij, diktatura finančne sfere, ki pogojuje politiko in njene izbire, ter tudi ideološka merila korektnosti in dovoljenih diskurzivnih praks, kar omejuje svobodo izražanja. Hkrati se krepi družbeni informativni nadzor, ki

je nova »kletka« sodobnih oblik življenja.[23] Zadrega, v kateri se je znašla sodobna, tehnološko grajena družba, je v resnici globlja, kot se morda zdi. Predvsem zato, ker jo na eni strani obvladuje načelo racionalnosti, končni rezultat katere je prevlada tehnike, ki ukinja tradicionalni »stari« in nasploh snovni svet, zaradi česar je Günther Anders že konec petdesetih let pisal, da je človek zastarel.[24]

Po drugi strani si sodobna družba na sledi progresivnemu nagibu, ki je ideološko liberalno sekularen, prizadeva za nenehno materialno rast ter vedno novo in neomejeno produkcijo, ki jo spremljata na videz prav tako neomejena hedonistična paradigma in emotivni nagib individualizirane globalne družbe. Ko je primarna skrb namenjena posebnemu, individualnemu in singularnemu, obče in skupno pa je dolgočasno.[25] To pa je v svojem jedru iracionalni nagib. Kako premagati to protislovje, je danes resen problem.

Preseganje je mogoče z omejitvijo »vsemogočnega« razuma ter tudi s konservativno držo in priznanjem meja, tako v tehnično ekonomski sferi pri izrabi zemeljskih virov, v preseganju antropocentričnega odnosa do narave, kot tudi pri drugačni »vzgoji čustev«, ki se bolj spoštljivo ozira do sveta, druge osebe in nazadnje do sebe. To pa zahteva redefinicijo človeške skupnosti, kulture in naravnega okolja.

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[23] S to problematiko se podrobno ukvarja Shoshana Zuboff. Njeno delo nedvomno pomeni prelom v sodobnem proučevanju postmoderne digitalne družbe: Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Luiss University Press, 2019).

[24] »Izdelava sredstev je postala smisel naše eksistence.« (Günther Anders, *Die Antiquierheit des Menschen I: Uber die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck Verlag, 1958), IV, 2).

[25] Tako začenja knjigo Andreas Reckwitz (*Družba singularnosti: O strukturnih spremembah moderne* (Ljubljana: založba Krtina, 2023), 9): »Kamorkoli v sodobni družbi pogledamo, vidimo, da tisto, kar se vse bolj pričakuje, ni obče, temveč posebno. Institucije in posamezniki svojih upov, interesov in naporov ne usmerjajo v standardizirano in regulirano, pač pa v edinstveno, v singularno.«

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DUHOVNA OSKRBA V VOJSKI V ČASU POSPEŠENE DIGITALIZACIJE, TEHNOLOŠKEGA NAPREDKA IN DRUŽBENIH PRELOMOV

Gašper Pirc

Uvod[1]

V letu 2024 je minilo sto šestdeset let od prve prave poteze legalizacije vojaških in humanitarnih načel,[2] ki predstavlja zapuščino, ki je orala ledino (mednarodno) pravni implementaciji človekovih pravic. Kljub številnim spremembam, ki so se zgodile v načinu in razumevanju uporabe vojaške sile v tem obdobju, je vsakršna konceptualizacija povezanosti vojske in države neposredno povezana z razumevanjem naravnih pravic človeka in politične strukture družbe, s tem pa tudi prevzete vrednosti človeškega bitja.

V letu 2025 živimo v času, ki ne skopari z izjemnimi pritiski in izzivi vsakdanjemu življenju. V obdobju po finančni krizi v letih 2007-2012 je visoko globalizirana svetovna skupnost vstopila v specifično razvojno fazo, ki jo zaznamujejo vse hitrejše spremembe, povečevanje napetosti v svetu in vse večja digitalizacija. V tem obdobju je digitalizacija prevzela

[1] Članek je bil spisan v okviru dela na projektu *Religiozna in duhovna oskrba za pripadnike Slovenske vojske v 21. stoletju* (REL-DUH SV) in raziskovalnega programa *Konstruktivna teologija v dobi digitalne kulture in antropocena* (P6-0434).

[2] Prim. prvo obliko Ženevske konvencije iz leta 1864, ki nagovarja pravice ranjenih in onesposobljenih vojakov in na svojstven način pomeni rojstvo institucionaliziranih človekovih pravic. Prim. »Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. Geneva, 22 August 1864,« International Humanitarian Law Databases, dostopano 23. oktobra 2025, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-1864.

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vodilno vlogo pri javnem podajanju oziroma prenosu informacij in v medijski panorami družbe. S tem je v slednjo vnesla tudi drugačne smernice razumevanja, kar se vse izraziteje kaže v vsakdanjem življenju. Pri tem je prišlo do razrasta novih oblik (digitalne) normativnosti, tipov nasilja ter, končno, načinov digitalnega in fizičnega vojskovanja.

Sodobni tehnološki in družbeni pretresi, med katere spada digitalni preporod, vključno z digitalizacijo vojskovanja, sunkovit razvoj umetne inteligence in avtomatizacija orožja, temeljito spreminjajo doživljanje oziroma etično in spoznavno dimenzijo posameznika, ob tem pa tudi predstavnikov vojnih sil kot (individualno) moralnih subjektov.

Digitalizacija spreminja delovanje v marsikateri sferi sodobnega življenja. Tako kot avtomatizacija oziroma avtonomizacija orožja spreminja način vojskovanja, novi tipi nasilja v (vse bolj) digitaliziranem okolju spreminjajo razumevanje pojavnosti in tipologije nasilja, ki razkriva povezanost med spreminjanjem moralnih dejavnikov v okolju ter razbohotenja odklonskega delovanja in razvitja specifičnih oblik odtujenosti, kot je pojem *moralne poškodbe*.[3] Digitalno nasilje obsega domeno številnih škodljivih spletnih vedenj, vključno s spletnim ustrahovanjem, spletnim nadlegovanjem in digitalnim zalezovanjem. Nekatere novejše študije denimo kažejo na povečanje rasizma, virtualnega ustrahovanja, starizma, seksizma, otroške pornografije in digitalnega zalezovanja, kar je podrobno opisano v relevantni literaturi,[4] in nakazujejo obsežnost resnih varnostnih, kazenskopravnih oziroma moralnih izzivov v digitalni dobi.

Navsezadnje je vredno premisliti tudi o (problematičnem) doprinosu digitalnih in virtualnih družb (vključno s konceptom metaverzuma) ter o tem, kako lahko interakcije med digitalnimi avatarji v takšnih virtualnih prostorih vodijo do problematičnih razmerij moči v spletnem

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[3] Glej denimo Rosemary Kellison, »Spiritual Fitness and Moral Responsibility in the Contemporary United States Military,« *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 91, št. 4 (2023): 777–797, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfae057; in Craig J. Bryan, AnnaBelle O. Bryan, Erika Roberge, Feea R. Leifker in David C. Rozek, »Moral injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behavior among National Guard personnel,« *Psychological trauma: theory, research, practice and policy* 10, št. 1 (2018): 36, https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000290. Koncept moralne poškodbe podrobneje obravnavam pozneje.

[4] Glej številne prispevke v Fahri Özsungur, ur., *Handbook of Research on Digital Violence and Discrimination Studies* (IGI Global, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-9187-1.

okolju in specifičnih oblik nasilja, ki jih ni mogoče preprosto podvreči togim pojmom, kot sta fizično ali verbalno nasilje;[5] tako vprašanja odnosov med ljudmi in njihovimi digitalnimi avatarji (zastopniki posameznikov v digitalnem svetu) kot tudi načini njihove interakcije so lahko pomembni pri prepoznavanju, kako lahko nasilje v sodobnem, večinoma digitaliziranem okolju prevzame nepoznano obliko, prepoznavanje katere lahko zahteva kompleksnejšo (hermenevtično) interpretacijo.

Spremembe je mogoče opaziti tudi v politični sferi. Z začetkom drugega mandata Donalda Trumpa na mestu predsednika ZDA, na čigar način delovanja in uveljavitev je močno vplival razvoj digitalnega okolja, družbenih omrežij in postdejstvene kulture, izhajajoče iz narativov digitalnega sveta, se je zaradi pomembne vloge Združenih držav Amerike v mednarodni skupnosti morda obrnil nov list v načinu političnega delovanja, razumevanja in komunikacije, posledično pa tudi diplomatskih in vojaških struktur. Trump je v začetku svojega drugega predsednikovanja sprejel številne ukrepe, ki so bili agresivno nastrojeni proti znanosti, univerzam oziroma koncepciji akademskosti in verodostojnosti raziskovanja ter drugače mislečim in tujcem, zaradi česar strokovnjaki opozarjajo, da se v vladni politiki ZDA kažejo diktatorske težnje oziroma da država drsi v avtokracijo, gnano s pomočjo intenzivne uporabe vseprisotnih digitalnih omrežij.[6]

Nekateri opazovalci gredo tako daleč, da ob predrugačenju medosebnih in tehnoloških razmerij v digitalni dobi opažajo tudi radikalne spremembe v novodobni družbeno-ekonomski strukturi. Tako denimo Janis Varufakis piše o vzponu tehnofevdalizma, ki naj bi s premenami v ekonomski strukturi digitalnega sveta, ki imajo močan vpliv na vse plasti družbenega življenja, radikalno predrugačil ekonomijo in zaključil z epoho klasičnega tržnega kapitalizma.[7]

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[5] Glej mdr. Sayyad Hussain, »Metaverse for education – Virtual or real?,« *Frontiers in Education* 8 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1177429; in Kocarev, Ljupco, in Jasna Koteska, »Digital Me Ontology and Ethics,« *ArXiv*, 22. december 2020, https://arxiv.org/abs/2012.14325.

[6] Dan Vergano, »Science Tells Us the U.S. Is Heading toward a Dictatorship,« *Scientific American*, 14. maj 2025, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/science-tells-us-the-u-s-is-heading-toward-a-dictatorship/.

[7] Janis Varufakis, *Tehnofevdalizem: kaj je pokončalo kapitalizem* (Mladinska knjiga, 2024). Morda je na tem mestu primeren komentar, da sem do določenih Varufakisovih sklepov precej

Ne glede na obliko oziroma pojavnost sprememb, se zdi jasno, da živimo v času velikih tehnoloških, političnih in družbenih prelomnic, ki povratno vplivajo na človekovo psihično doživljanje stvarnosti in zunanje dejavnike družbenih premikov. Poročilo, ki ga je junija 2024 s pomočjo raziskave na švedski univerzi v Uppsali izdal Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), prikazuje, da je bilo leta 2023 zabeleženih največ meddržavnih konfliktov po drugi svetovni vojni, triletje med 2021 in 2023 pa je prineslo na globalni ravni največ nasilja v zadnjih treh desetletjih. Čeprav se je število držav, ki so udeležene v konflikte, leta 2023 znižalo glede na prejšnje leto, je celotno število konfliktov doseglo rekordno raven.[8] Razvidno je, da se v minulem obdobju število kriznih žarišč ni bistveno zmanjšalo ali se je celo povečalo, z odpiranjem novih vojnih središč pa se vse bolj razkrivajo izzivi, ki jih prinašajo avtomatizacija orožja, razmah umetne inteligence tudi v vojaški rabi in vse bolj očitni elementi dehumanizacije, ki lahko povzročajo *moralne poškodbe*.[9]

Tovrstni dejavniki pogosto pomembno vplivajo na duhovno življenje pripadnikov oboroženih sil in razkrivajo pomembno vlogo, ki jo še danes – ali celo bolj kot v preteklem obdobju – zavzema vojaška oskrba v vojski.

Pomen religioznosti ter (pastoralne in humanistične) duhovne oskrbe v času sekularizacije in družbenih sprememb

Spremembe, ki so jih narekovale predrugačene razmere v sodobni družbi po seriji ekonomskih, političnih in humanitarnih kriz, spremembe v načinu javne komunikacije in spremljajoči digitalni preporod – torej fenomeni, ki so odločno zaznamovali zadnje desetletje – nakazujejo

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skeptičen in verjamem v celostno spremembo paradigme – tu mi vsaj delno potrjuje tudi način delovanja družbe na globalni ravni po nastopu drugega Trumpovega mandata na mestu predsednika ZDA –, vsekakor pa se strinjam, da so se ekonomske razmere in odnosi v digitalni dobi močno spremenili. Daljša razprava o tem bi presegla zasnovo in obseg članka.

8 »New data shows record number of armed conflicts,« Peace Research Institute Oslo, dostopano 23. oktobra 2025, https://www.prio.org/news/3532. Glej tudi Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2023* (Oslo: PRIO, 2024), https://www.prio.org/publications/14006, 6–21.

9 Bryan idr., »Moral injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behavior among National Guard personnel.«

potrebo po stalnosti v delovanju, verovanju in moralni perspektivi ter potrebo po duhovni pomoči drastičnim premenam in objektivnim nevarnostim izpostavljenem osebju, med katere vsekakor spadajo pripadniki vojaških sil.

S tem se odpira možnost za ohranitev pomena religijske plasti tudi v sekulariziranih družbah. Duhovna dimenzija se v sodobnem vojaškem kontekstu v sekularnih družbah navezuje na duhovno podporo ob krizi razumevanja perspektive smisla, odgovornosti in etike. Pri tem se duhovna oskrba usmerja na področja, ki jih enako poglobljeno ne obravnava pogosto družbeno bolj pripoznano osebje vojaških psihologov in psihiatrov. S specifično ontološko in epistemološko paradigmo, ki na mestu znanstvenega opazovanja zagovarja celostnost duhovne integritete in koherenten pristop k duševnem zdravju, zaseda duhovna oskrba svojevrstno in pogosto spregledano, toda v časih intenziviranja nestabilnosti na globalni ravni vse bolj relevantno mesto v vojaški strukturi.[10]

Kljub spremenjeni vlogi religije v zahodni digitalizirani družbi, le-ta ni v celoti izginila. Spremenila sta se javna percepcija in družbeni status religije, vendar ni moč zanikati, da duhovna dimenzija religioznega ostaja tvorna in družbeno relevantna. Tako je religijska tradicija eden od virov eksistencialnega smisla ter kulturne pripadnosti in posedovanja vrednot. V sodobnih pluraliziranih družbah, kakršne so družbe zahodnoevropskih držav, lahko dostopnost storitev duhovne oskrbe in spoštovanje svobode veroizpovedi pripomoreta k družbeni koheziji in moralni motivaciji. Glede na nekatere novejše raziskave prisotnost vezi s kulturno tradicijo pripomore tudi k integraciji manjšinskih religioznih skupnosti in olajšanju človekove (kulturne, družbene in politične) orientacije v družbi. Kot taka religijska pripadnost pripomore k *izboljšanju življenjske izkušnje* vernikov v družbi.[11]

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[10] Prim. Jan Grimell, Tatiana Letovaltseva, Janne Aalto in Hans De Ceuster, »Commanding with compassion: harnessing the potential of military chaplains within the NATO structure,« *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 16 (2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2025.1599662.

[11] Glej Josje ten Kate, Willem de Koster in Jeroen van der Waal, »The Effect of Religiosity on Life Satisfaction in a Secularized Context: Assessing the Relevance of Believing and Belonging,« *Review of Religious Research* 59, št. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0282-1. Glej tudi članek Seung-Hwan Kim, »The Public Role of Religion and the Response of Public Theology,« *Religions* 15, št. 4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040449, o pomenu religioznosti v tehnološko naprednih in z digitalnostjo prežetih družbah.

Duhovna oskrba pa obenem, kot bomo lahko videli, presega kontekst zgolj institucionaliziranih religioznih struktur. Medtem ko se duhovna oskrba tradicionalno duhovno oskrba povezuje s konceptom pastoralne oskrbe, je posebno v sekularnih družbah vse opaznejši porast interesa v humanistično oziroma sekularno duhovno oskrbo, usmerjeno v eksistencialno dobrobit brez neposrednega navezovanja na religiozno zapuščino.[12] Takšna duhovna nega se osredotoča predvsem na etično svetovanje in pomoč z dialogom z interesom vzpostavitve bivanjske stabilnosti pri vojakih.[13] Pri tem se *humanistični* kaplani, ki opravljajo vlogo svetovalcev pri humanistično-eksistencialni duhovni oskrbi, opirajo na terapevtske vire iz različnih znanstvenih, kulturnih in desakraliziranih religioznih kontekstov. Tako kot bolj prepoznavni *pastoralni* kaplani se raje kot na zdravljenje neposrednih vzrokov težav na podlagi empirično potrjenih študij osredinjajo na celostno duhovno ravnovesje človeka in podporo pri vzpostavitvi duhovne identitete.[14]

Raziskave, opravljene na Nizozemskem, ki velja za napredno ter kulturno in religiozno pluralno državo, kažejo pozitiven sprejem funkcije humanističnega kaplanstva v sodobni večverski družbi, ki je obenem močno sekularizirana in tehnološko progresivna. Pri tem pa se vendarle razkriva tudi problem identitete in omejitev humanistične duhovne oskrbe, k čemur se bom vrnil v nadaljevanju.[15] Navedeno velja glede duhovne oskrbe v vojski in drugih sferah družbenega življenja, na katere posega tovrstno delovanje. Tu je mogoče opaziti znake transformacije duhovne funkcije v sodobnem družbenem kontekstu, ki ustreza družbenim spremembam, ki vključujejo pluralizacijo in liberalizacijo družbe v zadnjem stoletju.

Ne glede na to, ali ima praktični primer duhovne oskrbe religiozno ali sekularno oziroma humanistično podstat, je razvidno, da se poskuša

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12 Prim. C. M. Schuhmann, J. Wojtkowiak, R. van Lierop in F. Pitstra, »Humanist chaplaincy according to Northwestern European humanist chaplains: towards a framework for understanding chaplaincy in secular societies,« *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 27, št. 4 (2021): 210–211, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2020.1723190.

13 Glej Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.«

14 Prav tam.

15 Prim. Tina Glasner, Carmen Schuhmann in Renske Kruizinga, »The future of chaplaincy in a secularized society: a mixed-methods survey from the Netherlands,« *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 29, št. 1 (2023): 137–143, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2022.2040894.

umestiti v družbeno strukturo kot nadomestek za na institucionalni ravni oslabele vire smisla oziroma vrednotenja na individualni in družbeni ravni, kakršen je bila tradicionalno lokalno prevladujoča religija. Ne samo da sunkovit razvoj digitalnih tehnologij, z njim povezano rahljanje pomena kulturnih in geografskih mej, racionalizacija na vseh ravneh življenja in kompleksna sekularizacija praznijo prostor vrednotenja in osmišljevanja, ki ga je institucionalizirana struktura religije podajala v predmodernih družbah, ter s tem pomemben vir duhovne pomoči v preteklosti – dejavniki modernizacije družbe pri posameznikih pogosto povzročijo ali stimulirajo duhovne stiske, moralne poškodbe in nezmožnost prepoznavanja eksistencialnega smisla, ki poraja potrebo po duhovni refleksiji. Tako je denimo kritični teoretik Franz L. Neumann že v eseju iz leta 1957 opažal, da utegne kolektivni družbeni nemir oziroma neravnovesje, ki ga povzroča visoko racionalizirana kapitalistična družba, pripomoči k razvoju psihičnih motenj pri posameznikih, ki se izražajo v obliki nevroz posameznikov, odtujenosti in nezmožnosti uspešnega delovanja na različnih ravneh družbe.[16]

Duhovna kriza se pojavlja tudi pri vojaškem osebju – kot bomo videli v nadaljevanju, morda zaradi pospešitve procesov avtomatizacije in avtonomizacije orožja in digitalizacije, ki povečuje hitrost deljenja informacij in interakcije na globalni ravni, v sodobnem času še močneje oziroma z intenzivnejšimi znaki. Četudi je v sodobni družbi institucija vojske strogo umeščena v sekularno sfero, se pripadniki vojaških sil prav tako kot drugi prebivalci soočajo z vprašanji življenja, smrti, odgovornosti ter duhovne in telesne travme; zdi se, da se ob povečanju intenzivnosti svetovnih konfliktov ter vsej večji povezanosti sveta in dostopnosti informacij v digitalni dobi tovrstni osebni izzivi pojavljajo še pogosteje. Pri odgovorih na vprašanja duhovnosti v vojski sodelujejo tako elementi religiozno-duhovne kot etično-eksistencialne oskrbe, ki neposredno ne nagovarja religioznih interesov.[17]

Ne glede na stopnjo sekulariziranosti in taktnost pristopa v sodobnih pluralnih družbah pa je vredno omeniti, da tehnološki preporod ne

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[16] Glej Franz L. Neumann, »Anxiety and Politics,« *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 15, št. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i2.901.

[17] Prim. Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.« Takšno razlikovanje je relevantno zlasti v visoko sekulariziranih družbah, kakršne zasledimo v nordijskih državah.

pomeni nujno zatona, pač pa pogosto funkcionalno spremembo religije, ki po izgubi temeljne politične, družbeno-etične in spoznavne vloge v družbi lahko ostane pristan duhovne stabilnosti, ki nudi oporo ob družbenih pretresih in služi kot *kritično ogledalo* tehnološko spreminjajoči se družbi, ki omogoča vpogled v dimenzije, ki jih ideologija tehnološkega napredka pogosto spregleda (na primer pomen duhovnega ravnotežja ali prisotnost dejavnikov dehumanizacije). Čeprav je zlasti v času postdejstvene kulture spoznavanja vredno ohraniti nepristranskost ter spoznavno prvenstvo empirične in z argumenti podprte znanosti, sodobno transformirana religija ohranja posebno družbeno vlogo; ne kot nasprotnica, temveč kot svojevrstna kritična sopotnica znanosti in sodobnih virov družbene normativnosti.[18]

Sledeč dolgi tradiciji Kantove in postkantovske misli ni odveč komentirati, da zmore religiozna refleksija tudi v visoko sekularizirani družbi znanosti in visoke tehnologije nastopati v vlogi, ki ustreza pojmu *regulativnih idej* za vrednostna vodila – morda manj neposredno zaznavno, še vedno pa na svoj način konstruktivno.

Kratka zgodovina duhovne oskrbe v vojski ter primeri uspešne prenovitve prakse v Severni in Zahodni Evropi

Kot je razvidno iz zgornje razprave, pojem duhovne oskrbe niti ni strogo vezan na pastoralno svetovalstvo, dogmatično poučevanje ali celo bogoslužje, niti ga ni moč preprosto opredeliti s premočrtno definicijo. Raje kot za enovito koncipirano dejavnost gre za širok nabor praks in odnosov, cilj katerih je podpora posameznikovi bivanjski integriteti. Tako se različnimi oblikami prakse – denimo s pastoralnimi tehnikami kot so molitve in obredi ali z elementi dialoške etično-duhovne refleksije in psihološke spodbude – podaja duhovna pomoč pri iskanju smisla, obvladovanju trpljenja, soočanju s krizo identitete ali krivdo in sramom

[18] Glej Bronislaw Szerszynski, »Rethinking the Secular: Science, Technology, and Religion Today,« *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 40, št. 4 (2005): 819–821, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2005.00709.x. O temi spreminjanja religije v sekularni družbi ter problematičnem nasprotju med izginjanjem in spreminjanjem religije v njej glej Bryan R. Wilson in Steve Bruce (ur.), *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On* (Oxford University Press, 2016) z urednikovo dopolnilno študijo.

ter, pa tudi pri resnejših duhovnih travmah kot so moralne poškodbe. Pri tem se v sodobni družbi pogosto strogo ločuje med pastoralno-religioznimi in humanistično-eksistencialnimi zasnutki duhovne oskrbe.[19]

V bolj oddaljeni zgodovini se je duhovna oskrba neposredno navezovala na zasnovo vzdrževanja religiozne integritete. Specifično se je vojaška duhovna oskrba razvila kot del cerkvene prisotnosti ob vojaških enotah, ki je vključevala dajanje zakramentov, pastoralno poučevanje in svetovanje ter vodenje obredov za ranjene in mrtve. V katoliških entitetah so vojaško duhovno oskrbo eventualno vodili designirani vojaški kaplani, protestantska tradicija pa je poznala vojaške duhovnike s sorodno funkcijo in nekoliko drugačnim, bolj lokaliziranim teološkim poudarkom. Tovrstne tradicije lahko zapažamo vse do 20. stoletja, ko sta ločitev države in cerkve ter profesionalizacija vojske spremenili notranja razmerja med vojsko in religiozno institucijo.[20]

To ne pomeni, da se je med vojsko in religiozno duhovno oskrbo mahoma pretrgala vez: tudi ob sekularizaciji večjega dela evropske družbe je pastoralna funkcija duhovne oskrbe ostala relevanten del institucije vojske in vojaški kaplani so ohranili pomembno vlogo pri vzdrževanju duhovnega ravnovesja pripadnikov oboroženih sil; ob tem se je s specializiranim izobraževanjem, sodelovanjem z medicinskim osebjem in razvijanjem kompetenc za psihološko delo služba vojaških kaplanov postopoma prilagodila razmeram in se profesionalizirala.

Vendarle pa se je pod pritiskom sekularizacije in pluralizacije ter rasti deleža neverujočih ali versko neopredeljenih duhovna oskrba v drugi polovici 20. stoletja in 21. stoletju pričela spreminjati v smeri večje

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[19] Prim. Marie-José H. E. Gijsberts, Anke I. Liefbroer, René Otten in Erik Olsman, »Spiritual Care in Palliative Care: A Systematic Review of the Recent European Literature,« *Medical Sciences* 7, št. 2 (2019), https://doi.org/10.3390/medsci7020025; Stephen R. Harding, Kevin J. Flannelly, Kathleen Galek in Helen P. Tannenbaum, »Spiritual Care, Pastoral Care, and Chaplains: Trends in the Health Care Literature,« *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 14, št. 2 (2008): 110–116, https://doi.org/10.1080/08854720802129067; ter Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.«

[20] Glej Doris L. Berger (ur.), *Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004). Glede na različne raziskave je sicer moč domnevati, da je bila že zelo zgodaj v zgodovini krščanska duhovščina prisotna v vojaškem okolju: glej npr. Yotam Tepper in Leah Di Segni, *A Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century CE at Kefar 'Othnay (Legio): Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005* (Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006).

religiozne odprtosti oziroma pluralnosti in inkluzivnosti v razmerju do sekularnih humanističnih kontekstov. V nekaterih državah Zahoda – zlasti v Severni Evropi – se vse bolj pojavljajo modeli, ki duhovno oskrbo premeščajo pod okrilje versko nedefiniranih ali sekularnih domen. Tako denimo v državah Severne Evrope bolnišnična in vojaška pastoralna oskrba vključuje elemente eksistencialne podpore, svetovanja in sodelovanja z nevtralnimi – *humanističnimi* – svetovalci, humanistične organizacije pa so začele zahtevati formalno priznanje nereligiozne duhovne oziroma pastoralne oskrbe.[21]

Vsekakor se je ob tem vredno povprašati, kaj sekularizirano vlogo izvajalca duhovne oskrbe efektivno ločuje od funkcije (vojaškega) psihologa in kakšna je specifična identiteta službe vojaškega kaplana izven religioznega konteksta. Medtem ko se zdi funkcija pastoralnega kaplana v religioznem kontekstu relativno jasno določljiva in prepoznavna, se vloga religiozno neobremenjenih izvajalcev duhovne oskrbe oziroma »sekularnih humanističnih vojaških kaplanov«[22] nekoliko težje razdvoji od uveljavljenih in znanstveno podprtih funkcij v vojaški podporni strukturi, kot sta vojaški psiholog in psihiater; prav tako se delo izvajalcev duhovne oskrbe pogosto srečuje s psihoterapijo in celo delovno medicino.

Načeloma velja, da naj bi bili uslužbenci na področju nudenja duhovne oskrbe v vojski ustrezno izobraženi na področjih psihologije in psihoterapevtske prakse, (predvsem praktične) filozofije in obramboslovja, posedovali pa naj bi tudi vsaj osnovno poznavanje sociologije in medicine. Kot takšni naj bi zasedli mesto krovnih strokovnjakov za podporo razvoju integritete posameznikov, celjenju moralnih ran ter pomoči pri razumevanju osebnega poslanstva in smisla. Celostno pregledno znanje v sferi duhovne podpore je tako *differentia specifica*, ki delo vojaškega kaplana ločuje od zgoraj omenjenih področnih strokovnjakov. Tu je vredno opozoriti na pomen preseganja področnih kontekstov ter zmožnost prehoda med različnimi redi vednosti in specifičnimi metodologijami – duhovna

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[21] Glej npr. »Humanist pastoral support is slowly becoming reality – at least in Europe,« Humanists International, dostopano 23. oktobra 2025, https://humanists.international/2018/09/humanist-pastoral-support-slowly-becoming-reality-least-europe/. Glej tudi Berger (ur.), *Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century.*

[22] Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.

oskrba vključuje prepoznavanje različnih vzorcev delovanja, kulturnih virov družbene normativnosti in vzpostavljanje dialoga med različnimi tradicijami.[23] Pri tem sekularna ponudba duhovne oskrba omogoča tovrstno nego tudi za tiste, ki so do pojma in prakse religije negativno nastrojeni, neopredeljeni ali težijo k razumevanju religioznosti v integralnem pomenu. Prav institucija humanističnega kaplanstva tako lahko poda most k ponudbi duhovne oskrbe v času, kjer obstaja med pojmoma religije in duhovnosti vse večja razlika.[24]

Sekularna duhovno oskrba pridobiva na pomenu in postaja vse bolj prisotna zlasti v državah Zahodne in Severne Evrope, kjer se poskuša razvijati v smeri vse večje odprtosti, inkluzivnosti in strukturne prilagoditve vse večji družbeni sekularizaciji in večverski družbeni panorami. Pri tem se modeli duhovne oskrbe v tej regiji vendarle okvirno razlikujejo od manj zgodovinsko konsistentnega in bolj k celostni oskrbi usmerjenega severnoameriškega pristopa.[25] Velja si ogledati primere specifičnih praks v državah, kjer je bilo v minulih letih opravljenih več raziskav na temo vojaškega kaplanstva, duhovna oskrba v vojski pa doživlja načrtne spremembe pod pritiski družbenih premikov.

Na Nizozemskem ima praksa duhovne oskrbe bogato zgodovino, ki se ji pridružuje vse bolj razvita sekularna-humanistična duhovno oskrba, ki je aktualna predvsem zaradi vse večjega števila versko neopredeljenega ali ateističnega verskega osebja. Prav tako je s pomočjo humanistične in tako s specifičnimi religioznimi praksami manj obremenjene duhovne oskrbe lažje vzpostavljati enoten okvir strokovne pomoči v večkulturni in večverski družbi. Četudi delo humanističnih kaplanov

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[23] Tu lahko v precejšnji meri naprezanja (vsaj pastoralne) duhovne oskrbe povežemo s teoretsko zasnovo Larteyjeve pastoralne teologije medkulturnosti, ki zagovarja sorodne principe prilagajanja svetovnim kontekstom in razvoja čuječnosti za različne kontekste v večkulturnem okolju (prim. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Wipf & Stock, 2013).

[24] Glej Harding idr., »Spiritual Care, Pastoral Care, and Chaplains,« 100–101.

[25] Prim. Jan Grimell, »Understanding the presence of military priests conducting military soul care in the Swedish armed forces: a medical sociological perspective,« *Frontiers in Sociology* 9 (2024), https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1408067. Tu je vredno pripomniti, da je v zadnjem času vse več raziskav o vlogi in spremembah v zvezi z duhovno oskrbo v državah Vzhodne in Srednje Evrope, vključno s Slovenijo. V zvezi s tem glej obširen pregled povezane literature v Liza Primc, »Religious and Spiritual Care in the Slovenian Armed Forces: A Scoping Literature Review,« *Bogoslovni vestnik* 85, št. 1 (2025)3, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2025/01/Primc.

ni brez nejasnosti in družbenikih izzivov, izhajajočih iz nerazumevanja, prav odprtost do različnih kulturnih in religioznih ozadij uporabnikov in nediskriminirajoča oskrba predstavljata pomembno razvojno točko vojnega kaplanstva v visoko pluralni družbi.[26] Zdi se, da potencial humanistične duhovne oskrbe omogoča premik k razumevanju vojaškega kaplanstva v integriranem sklopu zdravstvene oskrbe, čeprav z jasnimi in razločenimi poudarki službe duhovnega varstva.

Na Norveškem strokovnjaki ob povečanju čedalje bolj opažajo prehod v razumevanju koncepta duhovne oskrbe od »religioznega službovanja« k modelu »eksistencialne oskrbe«. Večreligiozna in v veliki meri sekularizirana dispozicija prebivalstva je poskrbela za to, da se je v minulih letih močno spremenil značaj duhovne oskrbe, vojaški kaplani pa postajajo vse bolj profesionalni in znanstveno podprti pri delu.[27]

Na Švedskem ob zavedanju pomena kontekstualnosti ter pomena pluralnosti mnenj, tradicij in kulturnih vzorcev vedenja in verovanja duhovna oskrba ohranja mesto v zgodovinskem izročilu prepletanja vojske in duhovne oskrbe. Značilno je, da čeprav obstaja medsebojno spoštovanje med osebjem medicinske oskrbe in kaplani v duhovni oskrbi, med njimi za razliko od severnoameriškega modela ni kompleksnejše razvite dinamike sodelovanja, profesionalci v duhovni oskrbi pa svoje delo razvidno ločujejo od ostalih oblik strokovne pomoči vojakom.[28] Pri tem je vredno izpostaviti, da je že od leta 1998 na Švedskem vladno (finančno in organizacijsko) podprta institucionalna duhovna oskrba za pripadnike različnih veroizpovedi (kar med drugim vključuje islamsko skupnost in pripadnike budizma) z namenom spodbujanja odprte družbe in nediskriminirajoče duhovne oskrbe.[29]

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[26] Prim. Schuhmann idr., »Humanist chaplaincy according to Northwestern European humanist chaplains.« Glej tudi Carmen Schuhmann, Theo Pleizier, Martin Walton in Jacques Körver, »How Military Chaplains Strengthen the Moral Resilience of Soldiers and Veterans: Results From a Case Studies Project in the Netherlands,« *Pastoral Psychology* 72 (2023), 618–621, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-023-01097-5.

[27] Hans Stifoss-Hanssen, Lars Johan Danbolt in Hilde Frøkedal, »Chaplaincy in Northern Europe: An overview from Norway,« *Tidsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 36, št. 2 (2019): 60, https://doi.org/10.48626/tpt.v36i2.5355.

[28] Glej Grimell, »Understanding the presence of military priests conducting military soul care in the Swedish armed forces.«

[29] Mats Rydinger in Valerie DeMarinis, »Institutional Spiritual Care in Sweden,« *Tidsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* 36, št. 2 (2019): 32, https://doi.org/10.48626/tpt.v36i2.5351. Morda je

Ne glede na specifike posameznih pristopov k duhovni oskrbi je tako tu moč izpostaviti, da postaja koncepcija duhovne oskrbe vse bolj znanstveno raziskana, občutljiva za različne kontekste, v katerih se pojavlja, in odprta za spremembe, ki jih prinaša čas. Zdi pa se, da bo zaradi velikih sprememb, ki jih prinašajo pospeševanje celostne digitalizacije družbe, avtomatizacija in avtonomizacija orožja ter dovršena globalizacija, v kratkem morda treba narediti nadaljnje korake adaptacije duhovne oskrbe za sodobne razmere.

Spremembe v sodobnem načinu vojskovanja in njihove posledice, avtonomna orožja in moralne poškodbe

Številni konflikti v minulih letih so nakazali, da se s celostno digitalizacijo in avtomatizacijo (orožja, dela in različnih delovnih sistemov) vse bolj spreminja značaj vojne ter vloga in izkušnje vojakov v vojnih žariščih. Četudi so premiki v smeri liberalizacije ter varnostne mreže in mednarodni stebri zaščite temeljnih pravic posameznikov in skupnosti, ki naj bi jih zagotavljale po drugi svetovni vojni vzpostavljene institucije in elementi mednarodnega prava kot so Organizacija združenih narodov z Mednarodnim kazenskim sodiščem ter Splošna deklaracija človekovih pravic z Mednarodnim paktom o državljanskih in političnih pravicahin Mednarodnim paktom o ekonomskih, socialnih in kulturnih pravicah, se, kot sem poudaril v uvodu pričujočega sestavka, število konfliktov po svetu v zadnjih letih ne zmanjšuje, temveč celo povečuje.[30] Pri tem se zdi, da spričo številnih razlogov, ki pa jih zaradi strukturnih in prostorskih omejitev tega prispevka ne morem ustrezno – argumentirano – razgrniti, vključujejo pa med drugim nezavezujoči značaj mednarodnega prava, ki je podvržen izrazom družbene moči, ter politične in ideološke pritiske, mednarodna skupnost deluje vse bolj nemočno ob vse bolj medijsko podprtih konfliktih, ki podobe vojnega uničevanja hipoma posredujejo svetovni skupnosti.

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na koncu poglavja vredno poudariti, da tako kot obstoji med sekularizirano duhovno oskrbo in pastoralno oskrbo pomembna ločnica, obstajajo tudi precejšnje razlike v specifiki nudenja duhovne pomoči med različnimi veroizpovedmi, česar pa zaradi omejitev prostora in konteksta ne morem nadalje razširiti na tem mestu.

[30] Glej Peace Research Institute Oslo, »New data shows record number of armed conflicts.«

Povezava splošne informiranosti oziroma anticipacije le-te v dobi interneta, nasprotujoče si informacije, podobe uničevanja, dehumanizirajočih ali celo genocidnih dejanj in prisotnost mehanizmov, ki povzročajo učinke dehumanizacije in odtujenosti, podaja občutek nemoči in *trpnega trpljenja* ter povzroča družbeno nelagodje, ki se še povečuje ob vzponu avtoritarizma v minulih letih. Narava in pogostnost vojaških konfliktov v zadnjem obdobju nakazujeta, da postaja ideja načelnega (že dolgo krhkega) svetovnega ravnovesja po drugi svetovni vojni vse manj pertinentna.

Skladno s spreminjanjem narave vojaških konfliktov in vse večjo informiranostjo prebivalstva se spreminja tudi eksistencialna izkušnja vojakov. Ob digitalizaciji je na doživljanje vojne vplival pospešen razvoj avtonomnega orožja, ki je drastično spremenil razmere na bojiščih in omogočil dejanja, ki jih konvencionalna orožja oziroma človeški vojaki niso mogli izvesti.

Med letoma 2020 in 2023 se je denimo v vojni v Gorskem Karabahu med armenskimi in azerbajdžanskimi oboroženimi silami z njihovimi podporniki in sateliti močno izrazila vloga avtonomnih orožij, zlasti dronov, ki so se izkazali kot ključni dejavnik pri doseganju vojaških ciljev. Natančneje, azerbajdžanski droni niso imeli težav z izmikanjem armenski protiletalski obrambi, nakazalo pa se je, da so fleksibilni v delovanju in tvorijo bistven del vojaških sil prihodnosti. Kljub prednostim, ki jih je prinesla tehnološka naprednost avtonomnih vojnih strojev, pa strokovnjaki opozarjajo, da vpliva dronov na potek vojne ne smemo preceniti in da sta h končnemu uspehu azerbajdžanskih sil pomembno pripomogli tudi taktična premoč in učinkovita opremljenost (konvencionalnih) kopenskih sil.[31] Čeprav je debata o tem zaradi drugih faktorjev manj v ospredju, droni in ostala avtonomna orožja igrajo ali so igrali pomembno vlogo v medijsko in politično močno izpostavljenih konfliktih v Ukrajini in Gazi. Ne glede na trenutno oziroma konkretno implementacijo avtonomnih orožij pa se zdi na dlani,

[31] Glej Joël Postma, »Drones over Nagorno-Karabakh: A glimpse at the future of war?,« *Atlantisch Perspectief* 45, št. 2 (2021), https://www.jstor.org/stable/48638213, in Davit Khachatryan, »Beyond the Drone Hype: Unpacking Nagorno-Karabakh's Real Lessons,« *EVN Report*, 24. marec, 2024, https://evnreport.com/opinion/beyond-the-drone-hype-unpacking-nagorno-karabakhs-real-lessons/.

da bodo tovrstna sredstva – vključujoč orožja masovnega opustošenja –, gnana s pomočjo vse bolj razvite umetne inteligence, zavzemala ključno mesto v prihodnjih vojaških konfliktih.[32] Zaradi depersonalizacije, za katero je zaslužna prisotnost avtonomnih orodij, sprememb v mreži odgovornosti in s tem povezanih spremenjenih vlog entitet v strukturi vojske obstaja nevarnost, da se bodo povečali učinki dehumanizacije oziroma zločinov proti človečnosti ob pomanjkanju neposrednega človeškega stika ter doprinosa čutnega in čustvenega delovanja v vojni. Posebej skrb vzbujajoč je manko transparentnosti ob razvoju avtonomnih orožij, vključujočih smrtonosna avtonomna orožja (LAWS), ki teži k celostni samostojnosti delovanja in zastira možnost človeške odločitve o njihovi uporabi. Čeprav za zdaj vojaško poveljstvo v zahodnem svetu stremi k vključitvi človeškega dejavnika v proces implementacije avtonomnega orožja, je vprašanje, kakšno stopnjo nadzora bodo še imeli ljudje ob silovitem razvoju umetne inteligence.[33]

Vsaj v danem trenutku je vloga človeških predstavnikov vojaških sil še vedno relevantna, pri čemer pa prisotnost avtonomnih orožij spreminja *modus operandi* vojaških konfliktov in ter strukturo odgovornosti, načel človečnosti v vojni in stopnjo intenzivnosti konfliktov. Četudi bi morda pričakovali, da lahko natančna orožja, zmožna sledenja in zadevanja neposrednih tarč, ter digitalno oziroma z umetno inteligenco kompleksno razvit nadzor nad bojevanjem pripomorejo k zmanjšanju trpljenja civilnega prebivalstva in vojakov, se to večinoma ne dogaja. Še več, pred kratkim prekinjeni konflikt v Gazi je prinesel stopnjo civilnega trpljenja in dehumanizacije, ki je v sodobnem času skoraj brez precedensa ter je imela ogromen vpliv na družbeno in politično delovanje tudi v formalno nevpletenih državah.

Veliko vlogo pri družbenem (ne)sprejemanju z vojno povzročenega trpljenja ima visoka stopnja ozaveščenosti spričo informacijske prežetosti sveta. Hipno posredovanje (včasih neverodostojnih ali nasprotujočih

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[32] Prim. Amir Husain, »*AI is Shaping the Future of War*,« *PRISM* 9, št. 3 (2021): 53–5, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2846375/ai-is-shaping-the-future-of-war/ 8.

[33] Glej Noreen Herzfeld, »Can Lethal Autonomous Weapons Be Just?« *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, št. 1 (2022): 76–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2021.1998750.

si) informacij povratno vpliva tudi na vojake ter njihovo doživljanje lastne vloge in moralnega sebstva.

Dehumanizacija, ki jo v informacijski dobi še stopnjuje prisotnost avtonomnih orožij, povzroča razvoj *moralnih poškodb*, občutka brazd v človekovi moralni zavesti, samopodobi in vrednotenju ob dejanjih, ki jih prepoznamo kot krivdna oziroma moralno zavržna.[34] Moralne poškodbe se pri vojakih pojavljajo zlasti v prostoru, kjer so podvrženi trajnim občutkom krivde in moralne vprašljivosti ob pojavnosti zločinov proti človečnosti, disproporcionalnega trpljenja in potez dehumanizacije, pri čemer večja stopnja ozaveščenosti v dobi interneta pripomore k uspešnejši prepoznavi in zdravljenju moralnih ran; pri tem se utegnejo moralne poškodbe prikazati kot celostne zdravstvene travme. Določene raziskave nakazujejo povečano stopnjo samomorilnosti med vojaki, zlasti v povezavi z učinki posttravmatske stresne motnje (PSTD).[35] Prav etična oziroma moralna spodbuda in vodenje dialoga, ki ga omogoča strokovno podkrepljena duhovna oskrba, lahko pripomoreta k lajšanju travm človekove vesti in razumevanja vrednot.[36] Pri tem je v kontekstu vse bolj religiozno raznolikega oziroma sekulariziranega sveta posebej vredno poudariti doprinos *eksistencialne* duhovne oskrbe. Povečana pozornost na problem moralne poškodbe in razvijanje programov za zdravljenje tovrstnih poškodb pod operativnim vodstvom usposobljenega osebja duhovne oskrbe lahko tako pripomore k lajšanju tegob ob nastopu novih oblik dehumanizacije in vojnega trpljenja.

Prav stik med različnimi kulturno-etičnimi in duhovnimi oziroma religioznimi izročili kaže na to, da se mora usposobljenost na področju duhovne oskrbe izpopolnjevati in dopolnjevati, zlasti ob praktičnem razumevanju učinkov vojne na vojake in civilno prebivalstvo. Tako denimo študije nakazujejo vrednost doprinosa ukrajinskih vojaških kaplanov k razumevanju potenciala duhovne oskrbe v vojski na podlagi

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[34] Prim. Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva in Shira Maguen, »Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy,« *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, št. 8 (2009), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003.

[35] Bryan idr., »Moral injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behavior among National Guard personnel.« Glej tudi Litz idr., »Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans«; in Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.«

[36] Grimell idr., »Commanding with compassion.«

izpostavitve empiričnih rezultatov razvoja strategij za moralno podporo ali metod obvladovanja masovne travme v konkretni vojni,[37] dočim je vojna v Gazi ob grozljivih podobah opustošenja in nečloveškega trpljenja poudarila potrebo po naprednih načinih humanitarne podpore civilistom ter pomenu psihosocialne in duševne podpore na več ravneh, ki je postala ključna komponenta humanitarne in zdravstvene intervencije na vojnem območju.[38] Četudi je morda v javnosti še vedno manj pripoznan, se tu razkriva potencialni pomen (eksistencialno dovzetne) duhovne oskrbe v vojnem obdobju.

Zaključek

Če je bila duhovna oskrba še do nedavnega vezana na lokalno prevladujočo religiozno strukturo in kulturne vzorce delovanja večinskega prebivalstva na posameznem ozemlju, so velike spremembe pod vplivom sekularizacije, poudarka na multireligioznosti in medkulturnosti in informacijske prežetosti poskrbele za to, da se je značaj te panoge v zadnjem obdobju precej spremenil. S prenosom poudarka na eksistencialno in etično integriteto namesto na utrjevanje vere so se odprla vrata za razumevanje duhovne oskrbe kot tehnik vzdrževanja duševnega zdravja ne glede na človekova prepričanja in kulturno-religiozno izročilo. Prav zaznaven razvoj sekularne, humanistične duhovne oskrbe, ki je bolj kot s teologijo in religiozno prakso povezana s praktično filozofijo in kompleksnim poznavanjem človekove duševnosti, ustreza duhu časa, ki je prežet s potezami *postreligioznosti* in idejami inkluzivnosti.

Pri tem rezultati, ki jih je mogoče razbrati ob akterjih duhovne pomoči na aktualnih vojnih žariščih po svetu nakazujejo, da igra duhovna oskrba vidno vlogo pri lajšanju (moralnih oziroma duševnih) travm vojakov in civilistov, pri čemer pa je vsekakor potrebno nadalje delovati na konsolidaciji sodelovanja z izvedenci s področja psihiatrije

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[37] Glej denimo Jan Grimell, »Understanding Ukrainian military chaplains as defenders of the human soul,« *Frontiers in Sociology* 10 (2025), https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1559023.

[38] Prim. Karl Blanchet, Martine Najem, Lina Shadid, Rouba Ali Fehmi, Fawzi Al Hammouri, Ghassan Saed, Khaled J. Saleh, Mosab Nasser, Nidal Moukaddam, Jonathan Polonsky in Omar Lattouf, »Rebuilding the health sector in Gaza: alternative humanitarian voices,« *Conflict and Health* 18 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-024-00599-0.

in psihologije. Glede na pospešen razvoj digitalnih orodij, umetne inteligence in avtonomnih orožij ter njihove učinke na duševno stanje vojakov in prizadetih civilistov v sodobnih vojnah se zdi, da bo duhovna oskrba v vojski ostala relevantna ali še pridobila na pomenu – pa četudi zlasti ob varovanju človečnosti čutečega, intencionalno delujočega bitja v svetu vse večjih napetosti in novih pojavnih oblik dehumanizacije.

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ABSTRACTS

Bojan Žalec
The Plausibility of Mind Uploading

This article discusses the plausibility of uploading the human mind onto a non-biological digital medium. The concept of mind uploading has gained significant momentum due to advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence. This question is highly relevant for theology and religion because it addresses key theological issues. Undoubtedly, mind uploading conflicts with religious and theological perspectives that view the human being as an inseparable unity of mind and body. Consequently, it should be examined from a theological standpoint. The author explores philosophical questions related to mind uploading, which are also very important for theology. He presents and critically examines the fundamental assumptions of mind uploading—namely dualism and functionalism—along with many arguments questioning its plausibility—including based on the biological limitations of consciousness, the phenomenological aspect of embodiment, the active perspective of consciousness, the significance of the body model in identity, and the role of body in social integration, relationships, and daily life. He devotes a lot of space to explaining the importance of the (lived) body. He shows how difficult it is to see how a non-biological digital substrate could replace it. He concludes that the plausibility of mind uploading remains highly questionable, both scientifically and philosophically. Based on current evidence, it is reasonable to argue that the human mind is fundamentally dependent on its biological and bodily aspects and cannot be reproduced on non-biological digital substrates.

Keywords: mind uploading, philosophy of mind, dualism, functionalism, biological aspects of the human mind, phenomenology of the body and mind.

Roman Globokar
Experiencing Mortality and Transcendence in the Digital Age

The rapid development of digital technology is also bringing changes to the experience of mortality and transcendence. New possibilities for prolonging life and the promise of immortality are prompting a reevaluation of who human beings

truly are and what path of development they should take to preserve the possibility of living with dignity in the future. In the first part, I critically evaluate Yuval Harari's provocative work Homo Deus, which suggests a transition from conditio humana to conditio posthumana, which is marked by desires for immortality, happiness, and divinity. He believes that algorithms play a central role in digital culture and are gaining increasing trust among people. A view called dataism is gaining prominence, which posits that all of reality is merely a collection of data. In the second part, I contrast this view with Hans Jonas's philosophy of the organism, which sees the living organism as a paradigm of being. The living organism cannot be reduced to data, and therefore, the whole of reality transcends the data level. An essential part of a living being is its mortality, which Jonas understands as both a burden and a blessing: without death, there is no new life. The last section is devoted to theological reflection on the dual character of human life alongside the first three chapters of Genesis. The fundamental biblical truth is that humanity is created in the image of God, which means that they are created transient, vulnerable, and mortal, but at the same time transcended and called to eternity. The basic thesis of this paper is that mortality is part of that human being created in God's image and that it is within our physicality and transience that we experience the longing to transcend this world and to seek eternity. Faith in a personal God, within the context of reductionist dataism, frees one from being trapped in the determinism of algorithms and gives one the courage to make responsible choices for the future of humanity.

Keywords: digital culture, mortality, transcendence, dataism, imago Dei, Yuval Harari, Hans Jonas.

Branko Klun

Christian Incarnation in the Age of Digital Disembodiment

In an age increasingly shaped by digital mediation, technological abstraction, and reductive conceptions of the human body, this article explores the concept of Christian embodiment as an important counter-narrative. Drawing on biblical anthropology, Jewish thought, and Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation and resurrection, it asserts that the body is not merely a technical obstacle or biological fact, but a place of gift, relation, and vocation. It is through the body that human personhood is expressed, love is enacted, and communion with others becomes possible. The article critically engages with contemporary cultural tendencies such

as transhumanism, posthumanism, and digital self-optimization, while offering a theological vision in which the fullness of life is realized not through the transcendence of the body, but through its transfiguration in love. Rooted in gratitude and relationship, Christian embodiment encourages a renewed ethic of presence in a world increasingly threatened by disembodiment.

Keywords: Christian anthropology, embodiment, digital culture, transhumanism, incarnation, relationality.

Mateja Centa Strahovnik, Vojko Strahovnik

Talking and Thinking with AI: How AI Chatbots Restructure Epistemic Identity and Virtue

The incorporation of large language models or AI-driven chatbots into everyday communication and knowledge practices has significant implications for how we think and understand ourselves as epistemic agents. This paper investigates how AI chatbots reshape epistemic identity and virtue, focusing on the effects of human-AI interaction. The use of AI chatbots can ultimately impact epistemic virtues such as curiosity, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness on the one hand, and also raise questions about epistemic agency and responsibility on the other. This paper emphasizes the importance of reflective practices that maintain human autonomy, foster epistemic responsibility, and promote virtuous collaboration with AI systems. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a partial reimagining of epistemic identity and epistemic collaboration in the age of AI, seeking a balance between the advantages of AI and the significance and uniqueness of human intellectual endeavors.

Keywords: epistemic identity, epistemic virtue, agency, Artificial Intelligence (AI), human-AI interaction, epistemic collaboration.

Barbara Simonič

Empathy Between Embodiment and Digital Depersonalization: Philosophical and Psychological Aspects

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the experience of another, is traditionally understood as a cornerstone of interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. However, in the age of digital communication and the increasing virtualization of interactions, important questions arise about the nature, expression, and impact of empathy. The development of digital technology and the ubiquity of the internet are changing the way we interact and communicate with each other, with the physical aspect increasingly disappearing. Although digital tools allow us to make contact quickly and efficiently, concerns are being raised about the impact of these forms of communication on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Digital communication is often text-based, asynchronous, and often anonymous, which reduces the presence of physical and social signs that are essential for a classic empathic experience. Against this backdrop, the discussion of empathy in the context of digital depersonalization requires a holistic approach that encompasses philosophical, psychological, and other perspectives. In this paper, we will address the challenges of empathy based on physicality and direct interpersonal contact, which are often diminished or absent in digital communication. This absence reduces the possibility of a full empathic experience and promotes the phenomenon of depersonalization.

Keywords: empathy, digital communication, depersonalization, embodiment, interpersonal relationships.

Nadja Furlan Štante

Emotional Cyborgs in a Hyperconnected World: AI, Embodiment, and Ecofeminist, Theological Reflections on Humanity and the Divine

Through the critical lens of theological ecofeminism, this article offers a nuanced analysis of the concept of the (emotional) cyborg, interrogating how the integration of technology into human (emotional) life reshapes individual identity, affective experience, and social relationality. Central to this inquiry are the dynamics of human interaction with affective computing and artificial emotional intelligence, broadly defined as technological systems capable of mimicking, interpreting, simulating, and responding to human emotions.

As developments in artificial intelligence and biotechnology continue to advance, the boundary between human and machine becomes increasingly porous. Within this context, the figure of the emotional cyborg emerges as a compelling framework for examining the transformation of human emotion and connection in technologically mediated environments.

This investigation is situated within broader socio-cultural concerns, particularly the contemporary quest for authenticity in a hyperconnected world, where digital interactions frequently eclipse embodied, face-to-face communication. Drawing on posthumanist and critical ecofeminist theory, this article explores the implications of the entanglement between human and artificial emotional intelligence. Among the key concerns are the potential for emotional alienation, the erosion of empathy and emotional literacy, and the commodification of affective life.

In addition, the analysis engages with the implications of these shifts for pressing contemporary issues, including mental health, social isolation, and the reconfiguration of community and belonging. At its core, the presentation interrogates how emotional cyborgs intersect with gendered experiences within technologically saturated realities, and challenges and reimagines traditional theological conceptions of embodiment and relationality.

The emotional cyborg, conceived as the hybridization of human emotional capacities with artificial intelligence, functions simultaneously as a reflection of and intervention in prevailing social constructions of gender, affectivity, and intersubjective connection.

Keywords: emotional cyborgs, theological ecofeminism, emotions, relationality, hyperconnected reality, gender stereotypes.

Ivan Platovnjak, Snežana Brumec

Between Disenchantment and Re-enchantment: Exploring AI as a Companion in the Inner Life

This article examines the speculative potential of designing a spiritually attuned artificial intelligence platform capable of supporting processes of meaning-making, fostering conditions conducive to emotional resonance, and assisting in the discovery of intrinsic values across diverse spiritual orientations. Situated within the socio-cultural context of late modernity—marked by the rationalization of life-worlds, increased individualization, and the erosion of traditional frameworks of meaning—we interpret the renewed emphasis on spirituality, emotional and embodied experience, as well as interiority, as indicative of a broader re-engagement

with right-hemisphere cognitive modes, as theorized by Iain McGilchrist. Rather than conceptualizing AI as a surrogate for spiritual experience or communal belonging, we explore whether this fundamentally left-hemisphere technological artifact could paradoxically be reconfigured to facilitate holistic perception, existential reflection, and prosocial engagement. Acknowledging the ethical complexities and epistemological constraints of such a vision, we propose a theoretical model for a digital interface that does not prescribe, but invites; that does not instruct, but listens. We conclude by posing a critical question: Can artificial intelligence, when sensitively designed, contribute to the re-enchantment of human experience—not by transmitting meaning, but by enabling deeper forms of dialogical presence?

Keywords: spirituality, artificial intelligence, right-hemisphere cognition, meaning-making, late modernity.

Erika Prijatelj

AI in Mental Health: A Tool for Support, Not a Substitute for the Human Person

Recent advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have opened up new avenues for mental health care, offering scalable and personalized interventions that address global shortages in clinical resources. Nevertheless, these technological innovations raise profound ethical and philosophical questions concerning the nature of human flourishing and the role of technology in healing. Grounded in Christian virtue ethics and theological anthropology, the discussion emphasizes mental health as a holistic process that integrates body, mind, and spirit within relational and moral contexts. While AI can augment clinical practice, it cannot replace the essential moral, spiritual, and relational dimensions that constitute authentic healing. Instead, AI's ethical role is to complement human presence and discernment, fostering virtue and holistic well-being rather than reducing the person to data or behavior patterns. The exploration concludes by advocating for interdisciplinary approaches, ensuring that AI integration in mental health honors human dignity and promotes a comprehensive vision of flourishing.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, mental health, Christian virtue ethics, theological anthropology, holistic care, moral character.

Jonas Miklavčič

The New Escape: Reality, Virtuality, and Religious Experience

This article examines a cultural reversal in the logic of escapism: whereas virtuality once served as a refuge from the burdens of reality, it is now increasingly experienced as the domain from which individuals seek escape. Practices such as digital detoxes, offline retreats, and slow living signal more than technological fatigue—they reveal a deeper existential longing. Through a phenomenological lens, this article identifies the experiential qualities people seek in their retreat from virtual life: silence, solitude, interiority, timelessness, and non-responsiveness. These characteristics closely parallel the structure of religious experience across traditions. Rather than returning to a pre-digital world, today's disconnection practices often reflect a search for a different mode of experience—one that resists algorithmic logic, commodification, and performative visibility. Paradoxically, even these retreats are often documented and shared online, reproducing the very conditions from which they aim to depart. Still, this movement suggests something significant: a largely unarticulated yet widespread desire for depth, stillness, and meaning. This article argues that contemporary escapism, though secular in form, reveals an implicit re-engagement with the sacred—less as belief or doctrine, and more as a structure of experience.

Keywords: escapism, virtuality, religious experience, digital culture, phenomenology.

David Kraner

Artificial Intelligence in the Educational Process. The Role of Communication and the Pitfalls of Alienation

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into the educational process is becoming increasingly relevant and inevitable, raising numerous questions about its impact on the quality of teaching and learning. This article discusses the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges faced by educators in using AI within modern learning environments. Among the identified benefits are personalized learning, the explanation of complex concepts, increased student engagement, and support in preparing instructional materials. On the other hand, concerns arise regarding the accuracy of information, risks of plagiarism, dependence on technology, and the loss of interpersonal connection. Research indicates that the successful integration of AI requires professional training for teachers, appropriate infrastructure, and critical reflection on ethical aspects. This article focuses on a key question:

can the thoughtful use of AI contribute to improved learning outcomes without compromising the human dimension of education?

Keywords: communication, artificial intelligence, educational process, technological tools, ethical challenges, teacher education.

Anja Zalta

Online Salafism – the Tension to (Co)Exist in Religious and Ideological Plurality

Social networks and the digital competence of new generations create parallel spaces and search for new approaches in the religious sphere, which produce religious innovations based on alternative interpretations of traditional religious systems. This article highlights the example of Salafist online influencers who are shaping new dynamics among Muslim communities, including in Europe, and who often do not listen to the simultaneous consensus of all societal actors or do not participate (voluntarily or otherwise) in defining the basic principles or constitutive values of (European) societies. The aim of this article is to draw attention to the recognition of the diversification and dynamics within Muslim communities in Europe today, with a particular focus on the rise of Salafi influencers who use social networks to spread their ideas and recruit followers. Our thesis is that social networks and the digital literacy of the new generations (especially Generation Z) create a parallel space that is alternative and often does not listen to the simultaneous consensus of all social actors. Salafist online influencers, who help shape the new dynamics between Muslim communities, including in Europe, often increase the tensions within Muslim communities and with European society in a broader sense.

Keywords: salafism, digitalization, social networks, generation Z, Muslims in Europe, salafist influencers.

Stjepan Štivić

Technological Salvation: Neuralink's Campaign Through the Lens of Religious Symbolism

This paper critically examines Neuralink's public campaign and promotional strategies through the lens of religious symbolism and marketing ideas. Positioned as a leader in brain-computer interface (BCI) development, Neuralink frames its technology not only as a groundbreaking medical intervention, capable of restoring various neurological problems, but also as a pathway toward human enhancement. The central argument is that Neuralink's marketing model appropriates elements of Christian religious symbolism, particularly embedding the messianic attributes of Jesus Christ. Through analysis of its messaging, media presence, and charismatic leadership, the paper contends that Neuralink constructs a narrative of technological salvation. This symbolic framing serves not only to generate public trust and enthusiasm but also to distinguish Neuralink within the competitive landscape of emerging neuroethologies.

Keywords: Neuralink, religious symbolism, marketing model, Jesus Christ, technological salvation, brain-computer interfaces (BCI).

Yue Bai (Yao Fa), Yaoping Liu

Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand: Practices, Local Patronage, and Challenges

Humanistic Buddhism usually implements Buddhist ideas every day to advance social harmony and personal satisfaction. With an emphasis on three main aspects—individual, universal, and transcendental—and six of its features, this paper investigates the beliefs and practices, local support, and obstacles that Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand encounters. Using a mixed-method approach, this study gathers quantitative data using questionnaires distributed to 400 respondents at two sites in Thailand: the Tzu Chi Foundation in Bangkok and Fo Guang Shan. In-depth interviews also involved thirty respondents—religious leaders, community members, Buddhist scholars engaged in Humanistic Buddhism, and so forth. The results revealed that the beliefs and practices of Humanistic Buddhism were consistent with the three dimensions of the tradition. Three primary challenges in the practice of Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand involved: (1) the resolution of internal conflicts, (2) the promotion of compassion in social relations, and (3) the management of existential issues. This study recommends a multifaceted approach to policy development that promotes the sustainability of

humanistic Buddhist practices in Thailand to amplify the roles of Buddhist organizations in community welfare and promote collaboration among Buddhist, governmental, and civil society institutions.

Keywords: Humanistic Buddhism, Thailand, government role, social harmony, modern challenges.

Igor Škamperle

Dilemmas Between Progressive and Conservative Thought: A Latent Source of Crisis in Modern Society

This article discusses two fundamental attitudes of modern European society, which manifest themselves as a political choice. These are progressive and conservative views. They often act as a source of social conflict. Since the French Revolution, this difference has also manifested itself as the political left and right. The thesis of the article is that the fundamental dilemma between the two appears to be a problem today, because the progressive position advocates open and unlimited possibilities of human choice and production, while perceiving humanity formally and subordinated to the state and global ideological structure. This can be controversial in today's technologically advanced world. The conservative position emphasizes the role of the community and puts a limit on human abilities, which is dictated by natural givenness and the principles of social hierarchy mediated by tradition.

Keywords: progressive, conservative, ideology, open society, limits.

Gašper Pirc

Spiritual Care in the Military in Times of Accelerated Digitalization, Technological Advancement, and Societal Upheaval

In this paper, I explore the concept of spiritual care in contemporary society. Drawing on a range of theoretical and empirical studies, as well as sociological and religious perspectives, I argue that within the Western cultural and political context, spiritual care has been gradually shifting from traditional pastoral models – closely tied to the practices of dominant religious institutions – toward pluralistic, interreligious, and humanist-secular forms of spiritual support.

The article examines the impact of the development of autonomous weapon systems and the information revolution, both of which contribute, directly or indirectly, to new forms of dehumanization and large-scale destruction. It analyses how various models of spiritual care – religious and humanist alike – respond to these transformations. Particular attention is devoted to the notion of moral injury, which has gained significant attention in recent religious and psychological scholarship, as the technological processes and socio-political changes of the present era appear to intensify such experiences of trauma.

This study suggests that spiritual care remains one of the few domains in which, amid the accelerated evolution of artificial intelligence and autonomous weaponry, direct human presence and ethical reflection continue to hold an essential place. This perspective enables an understanding of spiritual care as a holistic form of humanistic concern for the spirituality of the human being – an approach that transcends rigid geographical, religious, and normative boundaries.

Keywords: spiritual care, military chaplaincy, autonomous weapons, digital humanities, ethics of war, military and spirituality.

P O V Z E T K I

Bojan Žalec
Verjetnost naložitve uma

Predmet članka je verjetnost naložitve človeškega uma na nebiološki digitalni nosilec. Zamisel naložitve uma je dobila močen zagon zaradi napredka na področju digitalizacije in umetne inteligence. Vprašanje verjetnosti naložitve uma je zelo relevantno za teologijo in religijo, saj obravnava ključna teološka vprašanja. Nedvomno je naložitev uma v napetosti s tistimi (religioznimi in teološkimi) pogledi, ki človeka oziroma človeško osebo razumejo kot neločljivo enotnost duha in telesa. Zato je treba naložitev uma raziskati z vidika teologij. Avtor se ukvarja s filozofskimi vprašanji naložitve uma, ki pa so zelo pomembna tudi za teologijo. V članku predstavi in kritično premisli temeljni predpostavki naložitve uma, dualizem in funkcionalizem, in številne argumente proti verjetnosti naložitve uma, med drugimi argumente na podlagi bioloških omejitev zavesti, fenomenološkega vidika utelešenja, dejavnega vidika zavesti, pomena telesnega modela za identiteto ter vloge telesa v naši družbeni vpetosti, odnosih in življenju. Veliko pozornosti posveti pojasnitvi pomembnosti (živetega) telesa. Težko je videti, kako bi ga lahko nadomestil nebiološki digitalni substrat. V sklepu ugotavlja, da je verjetnost naložitve uma znanstveno in filozofsko zelo vprašljiva. Glede na razpoložljivo evidenco lahko utemeljeno zagovarjamo stališče, da je človeški um bistveno odvisen od svojih bioloških in telesnih vidikov, zato ga ni mogoče reproducirati na nebioloških digitalnih substratih.

Ključne besede: naložitev uma, filozofija uma, dualizem, funkcionalizem, biološki vidiki človeškega uma, fenomenologija telesa in uma.

Roman Globokar
Doživljanje umrljivosti in transcendence v digitalni dobi

Hiter razvoj digitalne tehnologije prinaša spremembe tudi na področju doživljanja umrljivosti in transcendence. Nove možnosti za podaljševanje življenja in obljube o neumrljivosti spodbujajo nov razmislek o tem, kdo je pravzaprav človek in kakšno pot razvoja naj ubere, da bo ohranil možnost dostojanstvenega življenja tudi v prihodnje. V prvem delu kritično ovrednotim provokativno delo Yuvala

Hararija Homo Deus, ki nakazuje prehod iz conditio humana v conditio posthumana, ki ga zaznamujejo želje po nesmrtnosti, sreči in božanskosti. Po njegovem prepričanju imajo znotraj digitalne kulture glavno vlogo algoritmi, ki med ljudmi pridobivajo čedalje večje zaupanje. Prevladovati začenja pogled, imenovan dataizem, ki trdi, da je celotna resničnost le skupek podatkov. Ta pogled v drugem delu primerjam s filozofijo organizma Hansa Jonasa, ki v živem organizmu vidi paradigmo biti. Živega organizma ni mogoče skrčiti na podatke, zato tudi celotna resničnost presega podatkovno raven. Bistveni del živega bitja je njegova umrljivost, ki jo Jonas razume kot breme in blagoslov: brez smrti ni novega življenja. Zadnji del je namenjen teološki refleksiji, v kateri ob prvih treh poglavjih Geneze razmišljam o dvojnem značaju človeškega življenja. Temeljna svetopisemska resnica je, da je človek ustvarjen po Božji podobi, kar pomeni, da je ustvarjen, minljiv, ranljiv in smrten, hkrati pa presežen in poklican k večnosti. Osnovna teza prispevka je, da je smrtnost del božjepodobnosti ter da človek prav znotraj svoje telesnosti in minljivosti izkuša hrepenenje po preseganju tega sveta in po večnosti. Vera v osebnega Boga pa znotraj redukcionističnega dataizma osvobaja iz ujetosti v determinizem algoritmov in daje pogum za odgovorne odločitve za prihodnost človeštva.

Ključne besede: digitalna kultura, umrljivost, transcendenca, dataizem, imago Dei, Yuval Harari, Hans Jonas.

Branko Klun

Krščansko utelešenje v dobi digitalne breztelesnosti

V času, ki ga vse bolj zaznamujejo digitalna mediacija, tehnološka abstrakcija in reduktivne koncepcije človeškega telesa, se članek posveča krščanskemu razumevanju utelešenja, ki je lahko pomembna protiutež tem težnjam. S pomočjo biblične antropologije, judovske misli in krščanskega učenja o učlovečenju in vstajenju članek zagovarja pogled, da telo ni tehnična ovira ali le biološko dejstvo, temveč kraj daru, odnosov in poklicanosti. Prek telesa se izraža človekova osebnost, uresničuje ljubezen in omogoča občestvo z drugimi. Članek kritično obravnava sodobne kulturne težnje, kot so transhumanizem, posthumanizem in samooptimiziranje, in ponuja teološko vizijo, v kateri se polnost življenja ne uresničuje prek transcendiranja telesa, temveč prek njegove preobrazbe v ljubezni. Krščanska utelešenost, ki temelji na hvaležnosti in odnosnosti, vabi k prenovljeni etiki prisotnosti v svetu, ki mu grozi vse večje raztelešenje.

Ključne besede: krščanska antropologija, utelešenost, digitalna kultura, transhumanizem, inkarnacija, odnosnost.

Mateja Centa Strahovnik, Vojko Strahovnik

Pogovarjanje in razmišljanje z umetno inteligenco: kako klepetalni roboti predrugačijo spoznavno identiteto in vrline

Vključevanje velikih jezikovnih modelov ali klepetalnih robotov, ki jih poganja umetna inteligenca (UI), v vsakdanje prakse komuniciranja in doseganja vednosti ima pomembne posledice za to, kako mislimo in razumemo sebe kot spoznavne delovalce. Ta prispevek raziskuje načine, na katere klepetalni roboti z UI preoblikujejo spoznavno identiteto in vrline, pri čemer se osredinja na učinke interakcije med človekom in umetno inteligenco. Uporaba klepetalnih robotov z UI lahko navsezadnje vpliva na spoznavne vrline, kot so zvedavost, intelektualna ponižnost in odprtost na eni strani, na drugi pa sproža vprašanja o spoznavni dejavnosti in odgovornosti. Članek poudarja pomen refleksivnih praks, ki ohranjajo človekovo avtonomijo, spodbujajo spoznavno odgovornost in krepijo krepostno sodelovanje s sistemi umetne inteligence. Na koncu se članek zavzema za delno preoblikovanje spoznavne identitete in spoznavnega sodelovanja v dobi UI, pri čemer išče ravnovesje med prednostmi UI ter pomenom in edinstvenostjo človeških intelektualnih prizadevanj.

Ključne besede: spoznavna identiteta, spoznavne vrline, delovanje, umetna inteligenca (UI), interakcija med človekom in UI, spoznavno sodelovanje.

Barbara Simonič

Empatija med telesnostjo in digitalno depersonalizacijo: filozofski in psihološki vidiki

Empatija kot zmožnost razumevanja in deljenja občutij drugega se tradicionalno razume kot temeljni kamen medosebnih odnosov in družbene kohezije. Vendar pa se v dobi digitalnega sporazumevanja in vse večje virtualizacije interakcij pojavljajo pomembna vprašanja o naravi, izrazu in vplivu empatije. Z razvojem digitalne tehnologije in razširjenostjo spleta se spreminjajo načini medsebojnega povezovanja in sporazumevanja, pri katerih telesni vidik izginja. Čeprav digitalna orodja omogočajo hitro in učinkovito vzpostavljanje stikov, se porajajo pomisleki o vplivu teh oblik sporazumevanja na kakovost medosebnih odnosov. Digitalno sporazumevanje je pogosto besedilno, asinhrono in velikokrat anonimno, kar zmanjšuje prisotnost telesnih in družbenih znakov, ki so bistveni za klasično empatično izkušnjo. Ob upoštevanju tega razprava o empatiji v kontekstu digitalne depersonalizacije zahteva celosten pristop, ki zajema filozofske, psihološke in druge vidike. V prispevku bomo obravnavali izzive empatije, ki temelji na telesnosti in

neposrednem medčloveškem stiku, ti temelji pa so pri digitalnem sporazumevanju pogosto okrnjeni ali popolnoma odsotni. Prav ta odsotnost zmanjšuje možnost polne empatične izkušnje in spodbuja pojav depersonalizacije.

Ključne besede: empatija, digitalno sporazumevanje, depersonalizacija, utelešenost, medosebni odnosi.

Nadja Furlan Štante

Čustveni kiborgi in izkušnja utelešenosti v hiperpovezani resničnosti

Skozi prizmo teološkega ekofeminizma članek kritično analizira koncept (čustvenih) kiborgov in postavlja vprašanje, kako lahko integracija tehnologije v človeške čustvene izkušnje spremeni posameznikove identitete, občutke in družbene odnose.

Analizirana so vprašanja človeške interakcije z afektivnim računalništvom, umetno čustveno inteligenco (splošni izraz za stroje, ki posnemajo človeško mišljenje ter merijo, razumejo in simulirajo človeška čustva ter odgovarjajo na ta).

Z napredkom umetne inteligence in biotehnologije se meje med človekom in strojem vse bolj zamejujejo, pojem čustvenega kiborga pa postaja močen okvir za razumevanje razvijajočih se človeških čustev in odnosov.

Članek se navezuje na širše družbeno-kulturne teme, vključno s prizadevanjem za avtentičnost v hiperpovezanem svetu, kjer digitalne interakcije pogosto zasenčijo osebne odnose. Skozi prizmo posthumanizma in kritične ekofeministične teorije članek raziskuje izzive prepletenosti človeške in umetne čustvene inteligence, vključno z možnostjo posledične odtujenosti, upada čustvene inteligence in empatije ter tveganj komodifikacije človeških čustev.

Raziskuje tudi, kako ta premik vpliva na sodobna vprašanja, kot so duševno zdravje, družbena izolacija in gradnja skupnosti.

Predstavitev na koncu raziskuje presečišče čustvenih kiborgov in izkušenj odnosnosti v hiperpovezanih resničnostih ter razmišlja o tem, kako te entitete izzivajo in preoblikujejo tradicionalno teološko razumevanje spola, utelešenja in odnosnosti. Čustveni kiborg, združitev človeških čustvenih sposobnosti z umetno inteligenco, deluje kot ogledalo družbenih konstrukcij spola, utelešene čustvenosti in odnosov, hkrati pa na njih tudi vpliva.

Ključne besede: čustveni kiborgi, teološki ekofeminizem, čustva, odnosnost, hiperpovezana resničnost, spolni stereotipi.

Ivan Platovnjak, Snežana Brumec

Med odčaranjem in ponovnim očaranjem: raziskovanje umetne inteligence kot sopotnice notranjega življenja

Članek proučuje spekulativni potencial oblikovanja duhovno naravnane platforme umetne inteligence, ki bi lahko podpirala procese ustvarjanja pomena, omogočala pogoje za čustveno resonanco in pomagala pri odkrivanju notranjih vrednot znotraj različnih duhovnih usmeritev. Vpet v družbeno-kulturni kontekst poznomodernosti – zaznamovane z racionalizacijo življenjskega sveta, povečano individualizacijo in razpadom tradicionalnega okvira smisla – prispevek razlaga ponoven poudarek na duhovnosti, čustvenih in telesnih izkušnjah ter notranjosti kot znamenja širšega ponovnega približevanja kognitivnim načinom desne možganske polovice, kot jih teoretizira Iain McGilchrist. Namesto da bi umetno inteligenco razumeli kot nadomestek duhovne izkušnje ali občestvene pripadnosti, raziskujemo možnost, da bi se ta izrazito levohemisferski tehnološki artefakt lahko paradoksalno preoblikoval v orodje, ki bi omogočalo celostno zaznavanje, bivanjsko refleksijo in prosocialno naravnanost. Ob upoštevanju etičnih zapletenosti in epistemoloških omejitev take vizije predlagamo teoretični model digitalnega vmesnika, ki ne predpisuje, temveč vabi; ki ne poučuje, temveč posluša. Prispevek končamo s kritičnim vprašanjem: ali lahko umetna inteligenca – če je oblikovana z zadostno občutljivostjo – prispeva k ponovni začaranosti človeške izkušnje, ne tako, da bi dajala smisel, temveč tako, da omogoča globlje oblike dialogične navzočnosti?

Ključne besede: duhovnost, umetna inteligenca, kognicija desne možganske polovice, iskanje smisla, poznomodernost.

Erika Prijatelj

Umetna inteligenca in duševno zdravje: orodje za podporo, ne nadomestilo za človeka

Nedavni napredek na področju umetne inteligence (UI) je odprl nove možnosti za oskrbo duševnega zdravja, saj omogoča razširljive in personalizirane intervencije, ki poskušajo odgovoriti na globalno pomanjkanje kliničnih virov. Kljub temu te tehnološke inovacije sprožajo globoka etična in filozofska vprašanja o naravi človeškega razvoja in vlogi tehnologije pri zdravljenju. Razprava, utemeljena na krščanski etiki vrlin in teološki antropologiji, poudarja duševno zdravje kot celosten proces, ki združuje telo, um in duha znotraj odnosnih in moralnih

okvirov. Čeprav lahko UI nadgradi klinično prakso, ne more nadomestiti bistvenih moralnih, duhovnih in odnosnih dimenzij, ki sestavljajo pristno zdravljenje. Namesto tega je etična vloga UI, da dopolnjuje človeško prisotnost in razločevanje, spodbuja vrlino in celostno dobrobit, namesto da osebo omejuje na podatke ali vzorce vedenja. Raziskava se konča z zagovarjanjem interdisciplinarnih pristopov, ki zagotavljajo, da integracija UI v duševno zdravje spoštuje človeško dostojanstvo in spodbuja celovito vizijo razvoja.

Ključne besede: umetna inteligenca, duševno zdravje, krščanska etika vrlin, teološka antropologija, celostna oskrba, moralni značaj.

Jonas Miklavčič

Novi beg: resničnost, virtualnost in religijsko izkustvo

Prispevek obravnava kulturni obrat v logiki eskapizma: medtem ko je virtualnost nekoč služila kot zatočišče pred bremeni resničnosti, jo danes vse pogosteje doživljamo kot področje, pred katerim želimo pobegniti. Prakse, kot so digitalni detoks, umik brez spleta in počasno življenje, ne kažejo le na tehnološko utrujenost, temveč razkrivajo globljo eksistencialno hrepenenje. Članek s fenomenološkega vidika analizira izkustvene značilnosti, ki jih ljudje iščejo ob umiku iz digitalnega sveta: tišino, samoto, notranjost, brezčasnost, nereaktivnost. Te lastnosti močno izražajo strukturo religiozne izkušnje skozi različne tradicije. Namesto da bi šlo za resnično vrnitev v preddigitalni svet, sodobne prakse odklopa pogosto izražajo iskanje drugačnega načina izkustva – takega, ki se upira algoritmični logiki, komodifikaciji in nenehni vidnosti. Paradoksalno pa so tudi ti umiki pogosto dokumentirani in deljeni na spletu, s čimer poustvarjajo pogoje, pred katerimi naj bi bežali. Kljub temu to gibanje razkriva nekaj bistvenega: pretežno neizrečeno, toda razširjeno željo po globini, miru in smislu. Članek zagovarja tezo, da sodobni eskapizem, čeprav v sekularni obliki, razkriva implicitno ponovno zbližanje s svetim – ne kot z verovanjem ali doktrino, temveč kot način izkustva.

Ključne besede: eskapizem, virtualnost, religijsko izkustvo, digitalna kultura, fenomenologija.

David Kraner

Umetna inteligenca v pedagoškem procesu. Vloga komunikacije in pasti odtujenosti

Vključevanje umetne inteligence (UI) v pedagoški proces postaja vse bolj aktualno in neizogibno, kar odpira številna vprašanja glede njenega vpliva na kakovost poučevanja in učenja. Članek obravnava prednosti, slabosti in izzive, s katerimi se soočajo vzgojno-izobraževalni delavci pri uporabi UI v sodobnem učnem okolju. Med ugotovljenimi prednostmi izstopajo personalizacija učenja, razlaga kompleksnih pojmov, večja angažiranost študentov in podpora pri pripravi učnih vsebin. Hkrati se pojavljajo pomisleki glede pravilnosti informacij, tveganja plagiatorstva, odvisnosti od tehnologije in izgube medosebnega stika. Raziskave kažejo, da so za uspešno integracijo UI nujne strokovna usposobljenost učiteljev, ustrezna infrastruktura in kritična refleksija o etičnih vidikih. Članek se osredinja na ključno vprašanje, ali lahko premišljena uporaba UI prispeva k boljšim učnim izidom, ne da bi pri tem ogrozila humani vidik izobraževanja.

Ključne besede: komunikacija, umetna inteligenca, pedagoški proces, tehnološki pripomočki, etični izzivi, izobraževanje učiteljev.

Anja Zalta

Spletni salafizem – utopična vizija in napetost (so)bivanja v verski in/ali ideološki pluralnosti

Družbena omrežja in digitalne kompetence novih generacij ustvarjajo vzporedne prostore in iščejo nove pristope na verskem področju, kar vodi v verske inovacije, ki temeljijo na alternativnih interpretacijah tradicionalnih verskih sistemov. Prispevek izpostavlja primer spletnih salafističnih vplivnežev, ki oblikujejo nove dinamike v muslimanskih skupnostih (tudi) v Evropi in ki pogosto ne upoštevajo hkratnega soglasja vseh družbenih akterjev ali (prostovoljno ali ne) ne sodelujejo pri opredeljevanju temeljnih načel oziroma konstitutivnih vrednot (evropskih) družb.

Namen prispevka je opozoriti na ključne dejavnike, s katerimi se morajo soočiti različne muslimanske skupnosti v Evropi in tudi evropska družba nasploh, da bi pritegnile mlajše generacije z uporabo novih tehnologij ter upoštevale spremembe v verskem spominu in izzive, ki jih vse to prinaša.

Ključne besede: salafizem, digitalizacija, družbena omrežja, generacija Z, muslimani.

Stjepan Štivić

Tehnološka odrešitev: kampanja podjetja Neuralink skozi prizmo verske simbolike

Prispevek kritično analizira javno kampanjo in promocijske strategije podjetja Neuralink skozi prizmo religiozne simbolike in marketinških konceptov. Neuralink, ki je vodilni akter na področju razvoja vmesnikov med možgani in računalnikom (BCI), svojo tehnologijo predstavlja ne le kot prelomno medicinsko intervencijo, sposobno obnavljanja različnih nevroloških funkcij, temveč tudi kot pot k nadgradnji človeških zmožnosti. Osrednja teza prispevka je, da marketinški model podjetja Neuralink povzema elemente krščanske religiozne simbolike, pri čemer zlasti vgrajuje mesijanske lastnosti Jezusa Kristusa. Skozi analizo komunikacijskih strategij, medijske prisotnosti in karizmatičnega vodstva članek zagovarja tezo, da Neuralink gradi naracijo tehnološkega odrešenja. Tak simbolni okvir ne spodbuja le zaupanja in navdušenja javnosti, temveč tudi omogoča, da se Neuralink razlikuje v konkurenčnem prostoru razvijajočih se nevrotehnologij.

Ključne besede: Neuralink, verska simbolika, marketinški model, Jezus Kristus, tehnološka odrešitev.

Yue Bai (Yao Fa), Yaoping Liu

Humanistični budizem na Tajskem: prakse, lokalno pokroviteljstvo in izzivi

Humanistični budizem navadno uresničuje budistične ideje v vsakdanjem življenju z namenom spodbujanja družbene harmonije in osebnega zadovoljstva. S poudarkom na treh osrednjih vidikih – individualnem, univerzalnem in transcendentalnem – ter šestih značilnostih humanističnega budizma sta avtorja članka raziskovala prepričanja in prakse te filozofske usmeritve na Tajskem, podporo, ki je je v lokalnem okolju deležna, in ovire, s katerimi se v njem srečuje. Kvantitativne podatke sta v študiji zbirala s kombiniranim pristopom, in sicer s pomočjo vprašalnikov, razdeljenih med 400 anketirancev na dveh lokacijah na Tajskem − v dobrodelni fundaciji Tzu Chi v Bangkoku in v organizaciji za mahajanski budizem Fo Guang Shan −, s tridesetimi anketiranci − med katerimi so bili verski voditelji, člani skupnosti, strokovnjaki za budizem, ki preučujejo njegovo humanistično idejno linijo, in drugi − pa sta opravila še poglobljene intervjuje. Rezultati so pokazali, da so prepričanja in prakse humanističnega budizma skladne z vsemi tremi razsežnostmi te tradicije. Trije poglavitni izzivi uresničevanja humanističnega budizma v vsakdanjem življenju na Tajskem so tako: (1) reševanje notranjih

konfliktov, (2) spodbujanje sočutnosti v družbenih odnosih in (3) obvladovanje bivanjskih vprašanj. Avtorja na podlagi študije priporočata večstranski pristop k razvojnim politikam, ki spodbuja trajnostne prakse humanističnega budizma na Tajskem, cilja katerih sta krepitev vloge budističnih organizacij za dobrobit skupnosti in spodbujanje sodelovanja med budističnimi, vladnimi in civilnodružbenimi ustanovami.

Ključne besede: humanistični budizem, Tajska, vloga vlade, družbena harmonija, sodobni izzivi.

Igor Škamperle

Dileme med progresivno in konservativno mislijo: vir krize sodobne družbe

Članek obravnava temeljni nazorski drži moderne evropske družbe, ki se izražata kot politična izbira. To sta progresivni in konservativni pogled. Pogosto nastopata kot vir družbenega konflikta. Od francoske revolucije naprej se ta razlika manifestira tudi kot politična levica in desnica. Teza članka je, da se temeljna dilema med njima danes kaže kot problem, kajti progresivno stališče zagovarja odprte in neomejene možnosti človekovih izbir in produkcije, človeka pa dojema formalno in podrejenega državni in globalni ideološki strukturi. To je v današnjem tehnološko razvitem svetu lahko sporno. Konservativno stališče poudarja vlogo skupnosti, človekovim zmožnostim pa postavlja mejo, ki jo narekuje naravna danost in s tradicijo posredovana načela družbene hierarhije.

Ključne besede: progresivno, konservativno, ideologija, odprta družba, omejitev.

Gašper Pirc

Duhovna oskrba v vojski v času pospešene digitalizacije, tehnološkega napredka in družbenih prelomov

V pričujočem prispevku raziskujem koncept duhovne oskrbe v sodobni družbi. Na podlagi številnih teoretskih in empiričnih raziskav ter sociološkega in religiološkega pristopa prikažem, da se duhovna oskrba zlasti v zahodni kulturno-politični kulturi vse bolj premika od tradicionalnih, pastoralnih modelov duhovne oskrbe, strogo povezanih z načinom dela lokalno prevladujočih religioznih institucij, k pluralnim, medreligioznim in humanistično-sekularnim oblikam duhovne podpore.

V članku obravnavam vpliv razvoja avtonomnih orožij in informacijskega preporoda, ki vsaj posredno vplivata na razvoj novih oblik dehumanizacije in primerov masovnega uničenja, na pripadnike vojske ter analiziram, kako se (tako religiozne kot humanistične) oblike duhovne oskrbe odzivajo na te spremembe. Poseben poudarek podajam pojmu moralne poškodbe, ki je v nedavni religiološki in psihološki literaturi požel precej zanimanja, tehnološki procesi sodobnosti in družbeno-politične spremembe pa morda še povečujejo pojavnost tovrstnih travm. V članku nakazujem, da je duhovna oskrba eno redkih polj, kjer se v času pospešenega razvoja umetne inteligence in avtonomnih orožij še ohranja prostor za neposreden človeški stik in etično refleksijo. To še posebej omogoča razumevanje duhovne oskrbe kot celostne humanistične skrbi za duhovnost človeškega bitja, ki ne pozna strogega ločevanja na podlagi geografskih, religioznih in vrednostno-normativnih meja.

Ključne besede: Duhovna oskrba, vojno kaplanstvo, avtonomno orožje, digitalna humanistika, etika vojne, vojska in duhovnost.

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BOJAN ŽALEC

Prof. Dr. Bojan Žalec is a philosopher at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana, where he leads the Institute for Philosophy and Social Ethics. He is a member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts based in Salzburg. Professor Žalec has authored nearly two hundred scientific publications published by reputable scientific publishers and journals. His research integrates elements from various philosophical schools, including analytic philosophy, phenomenology, personalism, and existential thought. He is currently the head of the scientific research project Theology and Digitalization: Anthropological and Ethical Challenges. He advocates for the reasonably grounded protection of human nature and humanity. In this context, the development of modern technology, digitalization, and artificial intelligence presents significant challenges that philosophy, theology, religious studies, and other humanities must respond to competently, as their contribution in this area is indispensable.

Prof. dr. Bojan Žalec je filozof, zaposlen na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani, kjer je predstojnik Inštituta za filozofijo in družbeno etiko. Je član Evropske akademije znanosti in umetnosti s sedežem v Salzburgu ter avtor skoraj dvesto znanstvenih publikacij, ki so izšle pri uglednih znanstvenih založbah in revijah. Pri raziskovanju združuje prvine različnih filozofskih smeri (analitična filozofija, fenomenologija, personalizem, eksistencialna misel). Trenutno je vodja znanstvenega raziskovalnega projekta Teologija in digitalizacija: antropološki in etični izzivi. Zavzema se za razumno utemeljeno zaščito človeškosti in človečnosti. V tem pogledu razvoj sodobne tehnologije, digitalizacija in umetna inteligenca prinašajo velike izzive, na katere se morajo kompetentno odzvati tudi filozofija, teologija, religiologija in druge humanistične vede, saj je njihov prispevek v tem pogledu nepogrešljiv.

ROMAN GLOBOKAR

Roman Globokar holds a doctorate in moral theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is an associate professor and head of the Department of Moral Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. He teaches courses in theological ethics, bioethics, social ethics, and human rights. He is a long-standing member of the Commission of the Republic of Slovenia for Medical Ethics. He has participated in several European projects on the implementation of ethical content in educational processes. His research focuses on bioethics, Christian ethics in a pluralistic society, the ethics of artificial intelligence, and ethics in education.

Roman Globokar je doktoriral iz moralne teologije na Papeški univerzi Gregoriana v Rimu. Je izredni profesor in predstojnik Katedre za moralno teologijo na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Predava predmete s področja teološke etike, bioetike, družbene etike in človekovih pravic. Je dolgoletni član Komisije Republike Slovenije za medicinsko etiko. Sodeloval je v več evropskih projektih glede implementacije etičnih vsebin v izobraževalne procese. Glavna področja njegovega raziskovanja so bioetika, krščanska etika v pluralni družbi, etika umetne inteligence ter etika v vzgoji in izobraževanju.

BRANKO KLUN

Branko Klun is a full professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. He studied in Ljubljana, Rome, Vienna, and Paris, and is a frequent guest lecturer abroad. His research focuses on metaphysics, continental philosophy of religion, and phenomenological existential analysis.

Branko Klun je redni profesor za filozofijo na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Študiral je v Ljubljani, Rimu, na Dunaju in v Parizu in kot vabljeni predavatelj pogosto gostuje v tujini. Težišča njegovega raziskovanja so metafizika, filozofija religije in fenomenološka eksistencialna analiza.

MATEJA CENTA STRAHOVNIK

Mateja Centa Strahovnik is an assistant professor and research associate at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. She is leading a start-up research program titled *The Intersection of Virtue, Experience, and Digital Culture: Ethical and Theological Insights*. Her areas of interest are theology, ethics, cognitive theories of emotion, Gestalt pedagogy, and artificial intelligence. She is a member of the Centre for Human-Centred Artificial Intelligence and Ethics of New Technologies. She is the author of the book *Čustva, človekova odnosnost in doseganje dobrega življenja* (Ljubljana: Faculty of Theology, 2023; Croatian translation, Zagreb, 2024).

Mateja Centa Strahovnik je docentka in znanstvena sodelavka na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Vodi zagonski raziskovalni program *Presečišče kreposti, izkustva in digitalne kulture: etični in teološki uvidi*. Njena področja delovanja so teologija, etika, kognitivna teorije čustev, geštalt pedagogika in umetna inteligenca. Ja članica Centra za na človeka osredinjeno umetno inteligenco in etiko novih tehnologij. Je avtorica knjige Čustva, človekova odnosnost in doseganje dobrega življenja (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta, 2023; prevod v hrvaški jezik *Čuvstva, čovjekova odnosnost i dosezanje dobrog života*; Zagreb 2024).

VOJKO STRAHOVNIK

Vojko Strahovnik is a full professor at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, and a scientific councillor at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. His research interests include moral theory, normative ethics, and epistemology. He is co-editor of the book series *Philosophy in Dialogue/Philosophie im Dialog* published by LIT Verlag (Berlin). His books include *Global Ethics: Perspectives on Global Justice* (LIT, Berlin 2019), *Moralna teorija. O naravi moralnosti* (Aristej, Maribor 2016), *Moralne sodbe, intuicija in moralna načela* (IPAK, Velenje 2009), *Challenging Moral Particularism* (Routledge, New York 2008), and *Practical Contexts* (Ontos-Verlag, Frankfurt 2004).

Vojko Strahovnik je redni profesor na Oddelku za filozofijo Filozofske fakultete in znanstveni svetnik na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Njegova znanstveno-raziskovalna področja vključujejo moralno teorijo, normativno etiko in spoznavno teorijo. Je sourednik knjižne zbirke *Philosophy in Dialogue/Philosophie im Dialog* pri založbi LIT Verlag (Berlin). Knjige: *Global Ethics: Perspectives on Global Justice* (LIT, Berlin 2019), *Moralna teorija. O naravi moralnosti* (Aristej, Maribor 2016), *Moralne sodbe, intuicija in moralna načela* (IPAK, Velenje 2009), *Challenging Moral Particularism* (Routledge, New York 2008) in *Practical Contexts* (Ontos-Verlag, Frankfurt 2004).

BARBARA SIMONIČ

Barbara Simonič is a full professor and researcher at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana, where she works at the Department of Marital and Family Therapy, Psychology, and Sociology of Religion. Her research focuses on Relational Family Therapy and the study of the connections between spirituality, psychotherapy, and interpersonal relationships. She is particularly interested in researching the role of empathy in various contexts.

Barbara Simonič je redna profesorica in raziskovalka na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani, kjer deluje na Katedri za zakonsko in družinsko terapijo ter psihologijo in sociologijo religije. Njeno raziskovalno delo se osredinja na področja relacijske družinske terapije ter proučevanja povezanosti med duhovnostjo, psihoterapijo in medosebnimi odnosi. Posebej se posveča kakovosti raziskovanja vloge empatije v različnih kontekstih.

NADJA FURLAN ŠTANTE

Dr Nadja Furlan Štante is Principal Research Associate and Full Professor of Religious Studies at the Science and Research Center Koper. Her current research interests are women's religious studies, ecofeminism, ecology, digital culture, and interreligious dialogue, as well as issues related to the digital age.

Prof. dr. Nadja Furlan Štante je znanstvena svetnica in redna profesorica religijskih znanosti Znanstveno-raziskovalnega središča Koper. Središče njenega znanstvenoraziskovalnega dela so ženske religijske študije, ekofeminizem, ekologija, digitalna kultura in medreligijski dialog.

IVAN PLATOVNJAK

Associate Professor Dr. Ivan Platovnjak, Head of the Department of Moral Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, offers a range of courses in the field of spirituality and coordinates the Advanced Studies in Spirituality program. A Jesuit priest of the Slovenian Province of the Society of Jesus, he is also active at the Saint Ignatius Retreat House in Ljubljana. His scholarly research also focuses on the theory and practice of spiritual accompaniment, with a particular emphasis on spiritual care for the seriously ill, the dying, and the bereaved. His SICRIS profile, ORCID (0000-0001-7779-0889), and ResearchGate profile.

Izredni profesor dr. Ivan Platovnjak, predstojnik Katedre za moralno teologijo na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani, izvaja številne predmete s področja duhovnosti in koordinira program Naprednih študij duhovnosti. Kot jezuit Slovenske province Družbe Jezusove deluje tudi v Ignacijevem domu duhovnosti v Ljubljani. Njegovo znanstveno raziskovanje je usmerjeno predvsem v teorijo in prakso duhovnega spremljanja s posebnim poudarkom na duhovni oskrbi hudo bolnih, umirajočih in žalujočih. Njegov raziskovalni profil je dostopen v sistemu SICRIS ter v mednarodnih mrežah ORCID (0000-0001-7779-0889) in ResearchGate.

SNEŽANA BRUMEC

Snežana Brumec is an independent researcher registered with the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). In 2016, she walked the Camino Francés in one month—an experience that she describes as the most fulfilling month of her life—which led her to pursue doctoral studies to understand why such journeys can be transformative. She earned a PhD in Sociology (University of Maribor, 2022) with the dissertation Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago as an Expression of Spirituality in Late Modernity, where she developed the answers she sought. Her research focuses on the sociology of pilgrimage, contemporary spirituality, value change and self-actualization, and European cultural routes, especially the Camino de Santiago in Europe. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1847-5827.

Snežana Brumec je samostojna raziskovalka, vpisana v evidenco Javne agencije za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije (ARIS). Leta 2016 je v mesecu dni prehodila Camino Francés – izkušnjo, ki jo opisuje kot najbolj izpolnjujoč mesec svojega življenja in jo je spodbudila k doktorskemu študiju, da bi razumela, zakaj so taka romanja lahko transformativna. Doktorirala je iz sociologije (Univerza v Mariboru, 2022) z disertacijo Romanje Camino de Santiago kot izraz poznomoderne duhovnosti, v kateri je oblikovala odgovore, ki jih je iskala. Njeno raziskovalno delo se osredinja na sociologijo romanja, sodobno duhovnost, spremembe vrednot in samouresničitev ter tudi na evropske kulturne poti, zlasti Camino de Santiago. Njen raziskovalni profil je dostopen v sistemu SICRIS ter v mednarodnih mrežah ORCID (0000-0002-1847-5827) in ResearchGate.

ERIKA PRIJATELJ

Dr. Erika Prijatelj is an Assistant Professor at both the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, and Hellenic College in the USA, where she also serves as the Director of the Psychology and Human Development Program. Her primary research explores the intersection of theology and psychology, with a particular focus on the questions that emerge from the dialogue between these two disciplines. She is currently a member of the research group of the project Theology and Digitalization (J6-60105).

Dr. Erika Prijatelj je docentka na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani in kolidžu Hellenic v ZDA, kjer opravlja tudi funkcijo vodje študijskega programa za psihologijo in razvoj človeka. Njeno raziskovalno delo se osredinja na presečišče teologije in psihologije s posebnim poudarkom na vprašanjih, ki izhajajo iz dialoga med tema disciplinama. Trenutno je članica raziskovalne skupine projekta Teologija in digitalizacija (J6-60105).

JONAS MIKLAVČIČ

Jonas Miklavčič is a researcher and assistant in philosophy at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. His research focuses primarily on the philosophy and ethics of technology, with a particular emphasis on the ethics of artificial intelligence and its impact on society. He regularly lectures, publishes academic articles, and participates in scholarly conferences on these topics. He is a member of the Center for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence and the Ethics of Emerging Technologies.

Jonas Miklavčič je raziskovalec in asistent za filozofijo na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Pri raziskovanju se usmerja predvsem v filozofijo in etiko tehnologije, pri čemer se še posebej ukvarja z etiko umetne inteligence in njenim vplivom na družbo. O teh temah redno predava, objavlja znanstvene članke in sodeluje na znanstvenih konferencah. Je član Centra za na človeka osredišče no umetno inteligenco in etiko novih tehnologij.

DAVID KRANER

Assoc. Prof. Dr. David Kraner is a member of the Department of Pastoral and Homiletic Theology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana, where he also serves as Vice-Dean for Academic Affairs. He studied at the Pontifical Lateran University and the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome, focusing on the impact of media and digital communication. In 2017, he obtained his PhD in Communication Studies. He is the author of *Le rappresentazioni sociali della Chiesa Cattolica in Slovenia*, a pioneering study on media influence and the social representations of the Catholic Church in Slovenia. He has participated in various projects, including leading the international LOOP project, which produced handbooks for novice teachers and mentors. He also heads the Multimedia Studio at the faculty.

Doc. dr. David Kraner je član Katedre za pastoralno in oznanjevalno teologijo na Teološki fakulteti UL in prodekan za študijske zadeve. Študiral je na papeški univerzi v Lateranu in salezijanski papeški univerzi v Rimu, kjer je poglobljeno raziskoval vpliv medijev in digitalnih komunikacij. Leta 2017 je doktoriral iz komunikologije. Je avtor knjige *Le rappresentazioni sociali della Chiesa Cattolica in Slovenia*, pionirske raziskave o medijskem vplivu na podobo Katoliške cerkve v Sloveniji. Vključen je v različne projekte, med drugim je vodil mednarodni projekt LOOP, v okviru katerega sta nastala priročnika za učitelje začetnike in mentorje. Na fakulteti vodi tudi Multimedijski studio.

ANJA ZALTA

Anja Zalta (1973) is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. Her current research areas are: gender and religion, religious minorities, sociology of religion.

Anja Zalta (1973) je izredna profesorica na Oddelku za sociologijo Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani. Njena trenutna raziskovalna področja so spol in religija, verske manjšine in sociologija religije.

STJEPAN ŠTIVIĆ

Stjepan Štivić is a researcher and assistant with a PhD at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana. His academic interests span philosophy, theology, and the ethics of new technology. His research focuses on the intersection between contemporary technological narratives, religion, and anthropological perspectives on the human person. He regularly participates in scientific conferences, summer schools, and public forums.

Stjepan Štivić je raziskovalec in asistent z doktoratom na Teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Njegovi raziskovalni interesi so filozofija, teologija in etika novih tehnologij. V svojem raziskovalnem delu se osredinja na preplet sodobnih tehnoloških pripovedi, religije in antropoloških pogledov na človeka. Redno sodeluje na znanstvenih konferencah, poletnih šolah in javnih tribunah.

YUE BAI (YAO FA)

Ven. Yue Bai (Dharma name: Yao Fa) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Global Buddhism Program at the Institute of Science, Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand. A devoted Buddhist nun with decades of experience in the study of Buddhist doctrine and classical languages, Ven. Yue Bai currently serves as a lecturer in Sanskrit and Abhidharma at the Lingdong Buddhist College in Guangdong Province, the People's Republic of China.

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Častita Yue Bai (duhovno ime: Yao Fa) je doktorandka programa globalnega budizma na Inštitutu za znanost, inovacije in kulturo Kraljeve univerze za tehnologijo v Bangkoku. Častita Yue Bai, predana budistična nuna z večdesetletnimi izkušnjami v preučevanju budističnega doktrine in klasičnih jezikov, trenutno deluje kot predavateljica sanskrta in budističnega nauka (abhidharme) na Fakulteti za budizem v Lingdongu, v kitajski provinci Guangdong.

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YAOPING LIU

Dr. Yaoping Liu s a researcher in Religious Studies with a particular focus on Chinese Buddhism and its transnational development in Southeast Asia. He currently serves as the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Professor in Buddhist Studies and Director of the Institute of Science Innovation and Culture at Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand. Dr. Liu is also the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Social Innovation and Knowledge, published by Brill. His research and teaching span topics such as religious transmission, cultural diplomacy, and Buddhist modernity, with a special focus on Chinese diasporic communities in Theravāda-dominated societies.

Dr. Yaoping Liu je raziskovalec religije, predvsem kitajskega budizma in njegovega transnacionalnega razvoja v jugovzhodni Aziji. Dr. Liu trenutno deluje kot profesor budističnih študij pri Fundaciji družine Roberta H. N. Hoja in direktor Inštituta za znanost, inovacije in kulturo na Kraljevi univerzi za tehnologijo v Bangkoku. Je tudi glavni urednik revije Journal of Social Innovation and Knowledge, ki izhaja pri mednarodni založbi Brill. Področja njegovega raziskovanja in poučevanja zajemajo teme, kot so posredovanje religijskih tradicij, kulturna diplomacija in budistična sodobnost, pri čemer se posebej posveča kitajskim diasporam v družbah s teravadskim budizmom kot prevladujočo religijo.

IGOR ŠKAMPERLE

Igor Škamperle (Triest, 1962) works at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. His field is the Sociology of Culture and he studies the History of Science, the Theory of Symbols, and the contemporary problematics of community. He has written two scientific books, *Culture of Renaissance* (1999) and *Endimion Dreams* (2013). He publishes articles in scientific magazines.

Igor Škamperle (Trst, 1962) dela kot docent na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Je sociolog kulture ter se posveča vprašanjem zgodovine znanosti, teoriji simbolov in sodobni problematiki skupnosti. Napisal je znanstveni knjigi *Kultura renesanse* (1999) in *Endimionove sanje* (2013). Objavlja članke v strokovnih revijah.

GAŠPER PIRC

Gašper Pirc, PhD, is a Research Associate at the Institute for Philosophical Studies, ZRS Koper, and an Assistant Professor at the AMEU, Faculty of Humanities. He previously worked as a researcher at the University of Vienna and the University of Innsbruck. Since 2020, he has served as the President of the Slovenian Philosophical Society. His research focuses on political philosophy, information technology studies, philosophy of law, and ethics.

Dr. Gašper Pirc je znanstveni sodelavec Inštituta za filozofske študije ZRS Koper in docent na AMEU – Fakulteti za humanistični študij. V preteklosti je deloval kot raziskovalec na Univerzi na Dunaju in Univerzi v Innsbrucku. Od leta 2020 je predsednik Slovenskega filozofskega društva. Njegovo raziskovalno delo zajema področja politične filozofije, študij informacijske tehnologije, filozofije prava in etike.

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