



“Moral Action in the New Digital Reality: Brief Reflections”

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Introduction

The phenomenon of artificial intelligence undoubtedly stands as a defining feature of our time, potentially capable of reshaping virtually every sphere of human activity. This disruptive technology began to assert itself just seventy years ago: the event that officially marks its inception is the conference held at Dartmouth College in 1956, organized by the young mathematician John McCarthy, who coined the expression “artificial intelligence” (Mitchell, 2019). Although this field of research has, from the outset, been characterized by a certain methodological pluralism, if not outright anarchy, AI has rapidly become a widespread and pervasive presence. Today, scholars speak of the “age of artificial intelligence” (Kissinger, Schmidt & Huttenlocher, 2023) to refer to the advent of a technology so innovative that it does not merely enhance or augment reality, but rather radically transforms it by creating new environments to inhabit and new forms of action with which to engage (Floridi, 2022). Its defining feature is that, not being designed for a single specific purpose, it fundamentally alters the way human beings carry out virtually every activity: AI, in effect, interferes with thought, knowledge, perception, and reality itself, to the point of reshaping the course of history.

When technique, from being a mere practical mode of transformation, becomes technology, namely, a capacity for rationalizing life capable of constructing an implicit universe of meaning (Pessina, 2001), new machines prove able to generate their own movement and to follow effective procedures more efficiently than human beings (Fabris, 2021). The extraordinary acceleration in the development of these technologies, which harness knowledge of the laws of nature, thus creates the conditions for the emergence of a new form of civilization (Agazzi, 2024).

We are now faced with the concrete prospect of coexisting and interacting with other species of non-exclusively biological origin: a digital species, consisting of automated systems endowed with partial cognitive autonomy and capable of surpassing human efficiency; and a hybrid species, in which the human and the digital are integrated, anatomically as well as functionally. Thus, the human being, long



characterized by uniquely distinctive capacities such as cognitive plasticity and cultural adaptability, reaches a turning point at which an existential drive toward enhancement, manifested in technology, now risks undermining human identity itself, potentially rendering it superfluous.

For this reason, the ethical question re-emerges in its full scope, as the inevitable inquiry arises: what are the consequences for moral action when it must operate within a reality constructed by the digital?

The Present Human Condition and the Primacy of Ethics

When we speak of the “techno-human condition” (Benanti, 2018), we refer to the bio-cultural inclination that has characterized the human being from the very beginning, marking his exceptional nature. Human interaction with the environment has always been mediated by the use of technique; yet it would be reductive to attribute this condition solely to biological deficiency (Gehlen, 2010). The technological artifact is rather an expression of the intentionality of the human person, as a sentient intelligence (Benanti, 2022), in his historical and relational self-realization. Through technique, human history takes shape; from the perspective of philosophical anthropology, it thus represents the concrete symbol of the humanization of the world. In this sense, the history of the evolution of the human species cannot be narrated separately from the history of the tools through which it externalizes itself, to the extent that our history is, first and foremost, a history of technological artifacts.

The expression “techno-human condition,” therefore, generally denotes the way in which human beings have always understood and enacted their existence: an interaction with the environment mediated by instruments. Ultimately, this condition is not merely a sign of human fragility and biological incompleteness; rather, it is an epiphenomenon that reveals humanity’s true essence, namely, that of a being marked by transcendental openness, whose infinite desire, constantly colliding with limited capacities, generates its distinctive creativity. Thus, within the vulnerable constitution of the human being lies also the origin of freedom, through which the world may be transformed and cared for.

Although the technological artifact is anthropologically dense, marking the human *topos* par excellence, the peculiarity of our age lies in the fact that the process of hybridization between the human and the artificial has reached extraordinarily high levels, to the point that it becomes difficult even to appeal to the normative value of these concepts when considered separately. Consequently, the danger emerges of falling into what may be described as technological totalitarianism.

The anxiety to transform both oneself and the world now entails the incessant renegotiation of boundaries previously regarded as insurmountable, made possible by the availability of technologies vastly enhanced compared to the past. Human beings are finally learning to create themselves and are moving toward mastering even the constitutive processes of their own corporeality, thanks to their



command of the biochemical foundations of life. The exercise of such extraordinary capacities incessantly raises questions of meaning. The very way in which reality is represented is now changing; for this reason, technique, evolving into technology, opens up an eminently anthropological question, insofar as it challenges the individual's perception of self as well as of the world.

The emergence of artificial intelligence, in this perspective, concerns what, following Hannah Arendt, may be called the “human condition.” According to Arendt, human existence is conditioned by all the things with which it comes into contact. The world in which life unfolds consists of things produced by human activities; yet precisely those things that owe their existence solely to human beings constantly condition their creators in return (Arendt, 1989). Human beings thus create and renew autonomously the conditions of their own existence, determined by everything with which they remain in prolonged contact. From a historically anthropological standpoint, it is impossible to deny the transformative feedback effect of technologies upon humanity: since the dawn of history, technical artifacts have hybridized with human beings, who, although having constructed them, are in turn shaped by them. Our reality is therefore sculpted by incessant interaction with the environment in which we are situated (Maturana & Varela, 1999), and experience is nourished by active engagement with data. We can thus grasp the meaning of the looming technological season, which has transformed tools into a new cultural space (Pessina, 2023). Technology is indeed an anthropological component of human existence, involving not only technique and science but all the ways in which humanity understands and interprets itself.

With the advent of what Luciano Floridi calls the “fourth revolution” (Floridi, 2017), whose outcomes are not yet fully evident but which raises numerous and diverse questions, we witness the rise of a technology capable of “inscribing” the world (Floridi, 2021), which is now designed so as to be compatible with its functioning. The first three scientific revolutions, which altered the understanding of the external world and, by reflection, our conception of ourselves, had dethroned humanity from the center of the cosmos (with Copernicus), from the center of the biological kingdom (with Darwin), and from the center of its own consciousness (with Freud). All that seemed to remain was the privilege of intellectual capacity, by which humanity could claim its unique place in the universe. It is precisely the digital revolution, initiated by Alan Turing and his machine, that has decreed that intelligence is no longer an exclusively human prerogative.

Once it was established that thinking means reasoning, and reasoning means calculating, the foundations of the fourth revolution were effectively laid. This revolution has a specifically ontological character, insofar as it writes new pages of the universe in binary code, revealing the genuinely *poietic* nature of information technology (Floridi, 2021). In this sense, the digital re-ontologizes reality, generating systems that modify the intrinsic nature of what they touch (Floridi, 2020), thereby



progressively influencing our way of understanding and relating to the world, as well as the way we conceive of ourselves and our relations with others.

The new human condition thus propels us into unpredictable scenarios: technology has now colonized the human environment, indeed, more precisely, it has become the human environment, so that our environment coincides with the technological one, in which “natural” and “artificial” elements coexist (Valera, 2022).

As the very coordinates of our existence change, we are inevitably compelled to revise our fundamental points of reference. In the face of the exponential increase in its capacities, the primary problem for the human being becomes the commitment to exercise choice rightly within the vast range of options opened up by the exceptional ability to interfere with life in general. The issue is no longer the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but rather the attainment of a knowledge of knowledge (Morin, 2000; 2001), capable of reflecting on its nature and aims, and of identifying the real responsibilities attached to a form of knowledge that also reveals itself as a dangerous form of power (Potter, 2000; Jonas, 1999).

If it is true that from the beginning the essence of humanity consists in the aptitude to transcend itself, it is equally certain that the preservation of identity is guaranteed by the constant renewal of the inevitable experience of limit, dictated by finitude, since the temporality that constitutes human existence places it between the insurmountable boundaries of birth and death. As a finite being, the human person is necessarily historical and relational, destined for coexistence with others, which in fact grounds the establishment of ethics: the very mark of humanity itself (Giacobello, 2019).

Conversely, in surrendering to the anarchy of technological nihilism, the human being risks condemning himself to a radical crisis of meaning, decreed by the loss of identity, which can be restored only by reactivating an ethics of responsibility toward the other and toward life as a whole. Meaning cannot be found outside oneself, by indefinitely extending scientific knowledge and promoting ever more advanced forms of understanding, but only by turning inward, reintegrating within the individual the sphere of moral conscience, which grounds freedom of choice, without which it is impossible to orient action.

Thus, the era of the unconditioned affirmation of technoscientific knowledge paradoxically results in the emergence of the primacy of the ethical dimension. With the fading of the long-cherished illusion that technoscience itself could ultimately provide humanity with both the criteria and the effective means for correct conduct, there now arises an urgent need to identify a form of wisdom capable of guiding the use of its most recent achievements.



Moral Action in the New Digital Reality

Although computers and robots are undoubtedly among the most complex systems human beings can conceive and construct in our present technological era, and they synthesize all the principles employed even by the most elementary machines, understanding the context of the ongoing revolution requires keeping firmly in mind the origin and nature of the historical phenomenon at stake. Essentially, the transposition of human intelligence and will into machines represents yet another form, albeit the most radical, of the objectification of human subjectivity.

In the age of artificial intelligence, the radical transformation of our environment and of the agents operating within it is determined by the emergence of a new mode through which human beings externalize themselves in their products. The prevailing idea has become that of copying and reproducing the functioning of the human brain outside the relational and environmental contexts in which it emerges in each individual, objectifying it in algorithmic form (Bodei, 2019).

In considering how moral agency may be configured within the new digital reality, one must begin with the fundamental awareness that the kind of knowledge possessed by machines is entirely dependent upon human decision. We design these machines in order to relieve ourselves of tasks and competencies whose burdens we seek to avoid. Forgetting the origin of the delegation we have conferred upon them gives rise to a profound misunderstanding, further exacerbated by the misuse of terminology that assimilates human and machine functions. The ambiguity of the language used to describe robots and artificial intelligence systems tends to erase the abyss separating human beings from so-called intelligent machines. What is overlooked is that the information most significant to us is not symbolic but semantic, information that presupposes consciousness. By contrast, what in AI is presented as “understanding” is merely symbolic pattern recognition, a mechanical function devoid of semantic awareness (Faggin, 2022). As John Searle has argued, processes of semanticization, those that generate meaning, are biological processes, inseparable from life and from the lived experience of being human, and cannot be reproduced by a computer (Searle, 1980).

The view that artificial intelligence might constitute a non-biological reproduction of human intelligence stems from a reductionist interpretation of the human being. According to the dualistic framework conveyed by what Damasio (1995) termed “Descartes’ error,” the human being would consist of distinct substances governed by different physical laws, such that *res cogitans* would relate to *res extensa* as software relates to hardware. Within this framework, human intelligence, conceived as the outcome of mechanistic interactions reproducible in a disembodied computer, would ultimately be capable of migration.

The anthropomorphic temptation to animate digital technologies, attributing to them identity and autonomous subjectivity, distracts us from the evident fact that they remain modes of human action.



They possess neither ontological stability nor genuine autonomous agency: computers are our creations, endowed only with the algorithmic component of our essence. For this reason, we are not computers, but the creators of computers (Faggin, 2022).

At the heart of the matter lies our tendency to overestimate advances in AI while underestimating the complexity of human intelligence. The “intelligent” dimension of AI is, in fact, its human component, which alone renders it intelligible. The absence of intelligence in machines is not a technical limitation but an ontological difference; accordingly, it cannot be remedied through incremental improvement. It is not an error or imperfection susceptible to correction. Thus, the semiotic relation between sign and object, for instance, when a machine stores an individual’s data, is not grounded in a physical relation between the two, but in the mediation of a human interpreter capable of understanding algorithms (Bertolaso & Marcos, 2023).

Even if technoscience profoundly reshapes the conditions of human existence and action (Floridi, 2017), it remains a human product and is ontologically dependent upon human decisions; therefore, it cannot escape human responsibility. To reintegrate technology within the human ecosystem, philosophical and anthropological studies must be strengthened so as to envision a sustainable coexistence between life and technology.

Such a radical transformation of the very conditions of life on Earth necessarily entails serious ethical consequences. The rapid advancement of AI is not accompanied by a parallel development of moral principles capable of governing it and containing it within those limits that have traditionally allowed human beings to act within a meaningful horizon. For this reason, moral philosophy in general, and bioethics in particular, which emerged in the technological age precisely to foster dialogue with the sciences, cannot evade this task.

While AI cannot be morally educated, insofar as it lacks personal subjectivity, it has become indispensable to address the moral question that invariably arises at the human–machine interface. AI constitutes, in effect, an additional capacity for action available to human beings, born not from a marriage between biology and engineering, but from a divorce between intelligence and successful action.

Precisely as a new modality of human agency, it requires ethical regulation (Floridi, 2022; 2023). The realization of an ethical AI demands that its exercise be oriented within a comprehensive framework of fundamental human values and principles.

Accordingly, research in this domain has expanded significantly (Kazim & Koshiyama, 2021). Digital ethics seeks to guide human conduct in the design and use of digital technologies in general, while AI ethics specifically aims to guide human behavior in the design and use of artificial systems by formulating and rationally adhering to principles and rules that reflect our guiding ideals and values. The development of a well-articulated and widely shared digital and AI ethics, grounded in respect for human



dignity and identity, has become an existentially significant global imperative (Hanna & Kazim, 2021). The question that remains concerns the most adequate approach to this challenge.

In this regard, some have explored the possibility of embedding ethical behavior within machine algorithms, an approach referred to as “algor-ethics” (Bottos & Desiata, 2021). This would entail attributing to machines a moralizing function through their algorithms. Yet conceiving AI systems as moral agents appears deeply problematic. A more appropriate approach would instead focus on the value-oriented responsibility of human designers and engineers, who must maintain a vigilant and accountable stance throughout all phases of development, analysis, and validation. One must ask what forms of power are promoted and enabled by these technologies, who controls and owns them, and what consequences their deployment entails, adopting, in this respect, a consequentialist perspective. The issue is not primarily one of hypothetical intentions embedded in algorithms, but of responsibility for the outcomes of their application (Cabitza, 2021).

The challenge we face today ultimately calls for a thorough rethinking of ethics itself, grounded in careful analysis of the new existential coordinates within which human freedom is exercised. Ethical reflection must continually renew value judgments capable of orienting human action toward the future. Ethics, by its very nature, is a flexible discipline, called upon to respond to the questions that arise within historically evolving societies characterized by changing conditions.

Conclusions

Artificial intelligence, with its re-ontologizing power, represents for humanity, more than any other technological achievement, an extraordinary opportunity as well as an immeasurable risk. We must learn to coexist with it without yielding either to the temptation of rejecting it out of fear or to that of accepting it uncritically when it conceals potential dangers. Rather, human beings must commit themselves to reaffirming and enhancing their essential role through the practice of intelligent design, shaping the future of our interactions with present and future intelligent artifacts and with the environments we share with them.

At the same time, there is growing awareness that human–machine interaction not only enhances human capabilities but also amplifies human vulnerability. If today human beings appear tempted to submit to the rigidity of the equations governing their artifacts, they do so in part to escape the unease generated by the awareness of their own finitude, a condition from which they seek emancipation through the illusion of total control (Sadin, 2019).

We must acknowledge, therefore, that our perspective on technology sometimes becomes obscured. By focusing primarily on the progress of human-made artifacts, we risk overlooking a fundamental dimension of the issue, namely, the ways in which human beings use technology, thereby



producing a distorted image of reality. Such a narrative intensifies the difficulty of deciphering an intrinsically complex relationship: that between human creators and masters, and machines, now intelligent yet still subordinate, whose inevitable interaction generates new scenarios inhabited by a disoriented humanity.

Although the awareness of the need to integrate ethical considerations into the design of algorithmic systems is longstanding and not unique to our time, the increasing complexity of these systems and our growing dependence upon them have heightened the urgency of developing a critical governance of AI, with particular attention to design-based solutions (Morley et al., 2020). Only in this way can the human community confidently embrace the opportunities offered by AI while remaining vigilant regarding the potential costs to be avoided (Floridi et al., 2018).

In conclusion, only a critical, balanced, and prudent evaluation of the issue can provide an adequate framework for ethically guiding technological progress and the use of new devices. Technologies are neither inherently good nor inherently bad; yet their impact is by no means morally neutral, since they always embody a program of action inscribed by human beings. It is therefore essential to ensure that collaboration between human intelligence and artificial intelligence be guided by the continuous exercise of what has been termed “digital wisdom” (Giacobello, 2016).

It has thus become increasingly urgent to reflect upon the need for a genuine “ethics of AI ethics” (Heilinger, 2022), a meta-ethical inquiry capable of confronting challenges that demand not only terminological revision but also a substantial expansion of our analytical horizon. Recognizing the complexity of the contexts in which AI operates, as well as the plurality of actors involved, enables a more adequate incorporation of relational ethics and social justice into this new landscape. At the same time, it becomes indispensable to promote more inclusive deliberative procedures, capable of representing diverse voices more equitably and of integrating more effectively the rich philosophical and ethical traditions already available.

Precisely because the lives of individuals and societies are now structured and oriented by machines, it makes little sense to position oneself as either for or against them, since they are integral to our existence. Moreover, the algorithmic world is neither for nor against the living; it is indifferent to it (Benasayag, 2020). While collective anxiety increasingly takes shape around fears of a potential “rebellion” of machines, the real issue is not technological but profoundly moral: it concerns humanity’s capacity to ethically orient its choices within a reality now largely constructed by the digital.

It is therefore time to rethink how we inhabit a world that accommodates multiple forms of existence and behavior, including those developed by synthetic and hybrid artifacts that resist traditional classifications. Our task is to cultivate an ethos capable of reconciling the natural and the artificial. We must learn to situate ourselves within a form of digital environmentalism (Floridi, 2017) that recognizes



as worthy of care all forms of interaction emerging in this new context, appealing to an ontology that involves us as vectors within a broader organic universe (Benasayag & Pennisi, 2024).

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