



PROJECT MUSE®

*Grandeur et Misère de l'Homme : AI and/or Human
Flourishing*

Thomas Pfau

Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture, Volume 27, Number
3, Summer 2024, pp. 11-32 (Article)

Published by Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/log.2024.a932878>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/932878>

Grandeur et Misère de l'Homme: AI and/or Human Flourishing

Every conquest over Nature increases her domain. The stars do not become Nature till we can weigh and measure them: the soul does not become Nature till we can psychoanalyze her. The wresting of powers *from* Nature is also the surrendering of things *to* Nature. As long as this process stops short of the final stage, we may well hold that the gain outweighs the loss. But as soon as we take the final step of reducing our own species to the level of mere Nature, the whole process is stultified, for this time the being who stood to gain and the being who has been sacrificed are one and the same.

C. S. LEWIS

The way up and down is one and the same
[οδός άνω κάτω μία και όυτή].

HERACLITUS

THE FOLLOWING REMARKS AIM TO SKETCH TWO FUNDAMENTALLY antithetical ways of thinking about artificial intelligence (AI) and the human person. The first one considers AI and related technologies within a long historical perspective, specifically the history of *technē* that, however unwittingly, has always been aimed at the total conquest of nature. The second conceptual framework is of a normative-metaphysical kind and unfolds on two distinct, albeit inextricably entwined plateaus. Both concern human flourishing, with the first unfolding within the order of historical time,

where it manifests itself, *inter alia*, in our experience of love, hope, joy, memory, and community. The second level posits that such flourishing can be properly experienced and realized only if the human person is understood as teleologically ordered toward a *summum bonum* or “hypergood” that transcends all the contingent values and transient goods to which a finite self finds itself intermittently attached.¹ The dramatic rise of AI (and CRISPR gene-editing) throws into sharp relief a decision towards which the history of *technē* has been building all along. Thus, human beings will either acknowledge, with all due epistemic humility, that notwithstanding all their moral and intellectual deficiency they are teleologically ordered towards a *summum bonum* that transcends all private conceiving and willing, or, conversely, they will acquiesce—as we currently appear poised to do—in their own *de facto* abolition and replacement by some kind of transhumanist utopia. That AI should be embraced so widely and in such naïve and indiscriminate fashion can probably be explained only if the phenomenon is framed within the by now almost two-centuries-long history of nihilism; but that is another story.

Meanwhile, we ought to acknowledge that the stark antinomy, the contours of which I shall try to delineate more firmly in a moment, is more than a historical contingency merely external to us, as it were. Rather, as Augustine and his seventeenth-century heirs (Pascal, Nicole, Arnauld, Sacy, et al.) maintain, it comports with the human being’s internally divided, postlapsarian nature. Indeed, were it not for the fact that, time and again, we experience our own nature’s inherent *misère*—e.g., our constant susceptibility to distraction, moral and epistemic confusion, violent impulses, sexual anarchy, mindless greed, and much else—the seductive efficiencies of AI and the sterile perfection promised by transhumanism would hardly hold the pervasive appeal they currently enjoy. Hence, this being my principal thesis and my provocation for this forum, we find ourselves more than ever at a crossroads: either to answer an essentially metaphysical summons, namely, to the loving cultivation of the gift that abides within our damaged yet nevertheless teleologically ordered nature; or, alternatively, to yield to the siren-call of technologies striving to “perfect” human nature in

ways that entail its de facto abolition and replacement by algorithmic and genetic counterfeits. In the latter case, the road allegedly leading up towards the algorithmic and genetic perfection of the human person is the same as the road leading us down towards a reductionist account of the human person and, ultimately, toward a nihilistic transhumanism intent on closing that account for good.

I.

What holds true for any new phenomenon also holds true for AI: we can properly understand it and take the measure of its implications only if we learn to resist the noisy, self-congratulatory jargon of the “revolutionary” and the “unprecedented” and, instead, situate it within a long narrative arc, the scope of which is not delimited by the current phenomenon. In the case of AI, that metanarrative involves the story of *technē* and how it has transformed the human project over the long *durée*. To that end, and by way of counterpointing the Enlightenment optimism of Immanuel Kant’s well-known 1786 text, my essay might be titled *Conjectural End of Human History*, with the stress now decidedly falling on “human” as the imperiled category. In so doing, I will alternate between a descriptive language borrowed from the philosophical anthropology of Nietzsche and Arnold Gehlen and a sharply normative outlook informed by Augustine and Pascal. Rather than abiding within the immediate concerns raised by our main topic, I propose that we consider AI as a symptom within the long *durée* of our species’ dialectical relation to technologies through which it alternately fashions and undoes itself. Only within this larger penumbra—and not by narrow, strictly formal accounts of AI as either congruent with or antithetical to human practice—can we hope to address some of its more particular effects, ranging as they do from the convenient to the corrosive to the terminal.

We might begin by recalling Nietzsche’s well-known characterization of the human being as “the not-yet determined animal” (*das noch nicht festgestellte Tier* [*Beyond Good and Evil*, no. 62]), which is usually (though, as we shall see, one-sidedly) understood as highlighting the human being’s constitutive indeterminacy: his or her

apparent lack of fit into a specific biotope (*umweltbefreit*); its lack of strong instinctual guidance (*Instinkreduktion*); and its consequent search for reducing (*Entlastung*) the numberless contingencies of its lifeworld, namely, by generating from within itself the resources, both practical and theoretical, that will allow it to endure and, perchance, to flourish.² In his 1940 book *Der Mensch*, Arnold Gehlen summarizes the matter thus:

All human actions are twofold: First, man actively masters the world around him by transforming it to serve his purposes for the simple reason that there are no natural, organically fitted conditions of existence into which man might enter, or because the “natural,” unadjusted conditions of existence are intolerable for him. Second, to accomplish this, he draws upon a highly complex hierarchy of skills and establishes within himself a developmental order of abilities; this order is based on potential usefulness of the skills and must be constructed singlehandedly by man, sometimes overcoming internal resistance to doing so . . . In so “processing” the ambient world, all things are thereby unwittingly endowed with a high degree of symbolism such that, eventually, the eye alone (an effortless sense) can take them in and quickly assess their potential usefulness and value.³

Implicit in this continual “processing [of] the ambient world” is its visual and cognitive appraisal, not as an organic home but as a fundamentally alien space alternately perceived as material obstacle or valuable resource. Either way, if we accept that our default stance vis-à-vis the natural world is the one of conquest and instrumentalization, then technologies such as AI and CRISPR gene editing can be understood as the third and perhaps final phase in the history of our species. As the culmination of a conquest of nature that has been integral to the species history of *Homo sapiens* from its very beginnings, the replacement of organic nature with its algorithmic and biochemical counterfeit by AI and gene editing technologies appears a logical, indeed all but inevitable phase within the functionalist anthropologies of Nietzsche and Gehlen.

That said, our existential situation appears just as volatile when considered from the stridently normative theological framework of Augustine and Pascal. For the strict Augustinian view likewise

premises the ontological unease of postlapsarian beings estranged from nature qua Creation and thus in a state of constant affliction, the symptoms of which run the full gamut from boredom, anxiety, and distraction all the way to the boundless scientific curiosity and epistemic pride that have at last brought us to the present moment. Aptly figured as the “brown god” of the Mississippi River in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, nature’s otherness hovers just at the periphery of our consciousness, an oblique presence,

Sullen, untamed and intractable,
 Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier;
 Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyer of commerce;
 Then only a problem confronting the builder of bridges.
 The problem once solved, the brown god is almost forgotten
 By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable.
 Keeping his seasons, and rages, destroyer, reminder
 Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
 By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and
 waiting.⁴

In the form of a deep-seated and constant angst, nature’s otherness has, in fact, always been implanted within us, an integral feature of our own nature—an alien deity, muddy and menacing like Eliot’s “brown god” forever “waiting, watching.” If external nature registers within us as angst, it does so because our encounter with it reveals a persistent and vexing asymmetry between our reach and our grasp, between limitlessness of our desires and the finite measure of our knowledge. What in a fine Augustinian turn of phrase Coleridge calls “the mysterious diversity between the injunctions of the mind and the elections of the will” thus describes an ontological predicament of which AI is but the latest symptom.⁵ At the same time, the constant presence of AI in the news-stream of our “twittering world” (again, T. S. Eliot’s phrase) may, in fact, explain why the technology is rarely considered within the long narrative arc of the human species. After all, a considered appraisal of the meaning of AI presupposes, among other things, precisely those habits and powers of memory that have demonstrably been eroded by the rise of digital technologies and social media over the past twenty-five years, a point to which I will return shortly.

Again, integral to our existential indeterminacy is our deep-seated unease with the brute givenness and disconcerting otherness of a nature variously experienced as volatile and, at least potentially, a threat demanding containment (what Gehlen calls *Aussenweltstabilisierung*) by technologies generated in exponential numbers since the dawn of the industrial age. Very broadly speaking, we may identify three successive stages within this conjectural history. The first phase lasts from the beginning of *Homo sapiens* and involves fashioning primitive tools, discovering fire, and harnessing the elements (soil and irrigation for agriculture, wind for transportation, grasses for livestock or roof-covering, herbs for medicinal purposes, etc.). Though this phase does not conclude for good until the early 1800s, first indications of a paradigm shift can be found in the mid-1500s, when the default approach shifts from harnessing nature as given in its organic productions to consuming its raw materials for contrivances of our own devising.

Reflecting the replacement of wood and wind by steam and steel is a rhetorical shift, first observable around the mid-eighteenth century, from nature as incontrovertibly real to the mere concept or idea of nature, such as we find it promoted in the sentimentalism and Romanticism inspired by Rousseau and, eventually, in symbolism's pseudo-organic forms. This terminological shift—reflected in the nineteenth century's compulsive overuse of the word “symbolism” itself—betokens a more aggressive phase in our species' outlook on the natural world. Thus, as C. S. Lewis notes, in the wake of the Romantic era, “We are always conquering Nature, *because* ‘Nature’ is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered.”⁶ Among those shrewdly and eloquently chronicling the “natural history of destruction,” the ominous shadow of which stands in inverse proportion to our species' professed advances toward “Enlightenment,” is W. G. Sebald. In his *Rings of Saturn* he remarks how, “far more decisively” than by soil composition or maritime climate, the “melancholy region” of East Anglia in its present aspect was shaped by “the steady and advancing destruction over a period of many centuries.” If the East Anglian biotope had since times immemorial been defined by dense forestation (“oaks and elms . . . spreading in unbroken waves across the gently undulating country right down to the

coast”), the late sixteenth century saw it being rapidly consumed by systematic logging and burning; and as in East Anglia, so, too,

great fires were now lit on the other side of the ocean. It is not for nothing that Brazil owes its name to the French word for charcoal. Our spread over the earth was fueled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn. From the first smoldering taper to the elegant lanterns whose light reverberated around eighteenth-century courtyards and from the mild radiance of these lanterns to the unearthly glow of the sodium lamps that line the Belgian motorways, it has all been combustion. Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artefact we create. The making of a fish-hook, manufacture of a China cup, or production of a television program, all depend on the same process of combustion. Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away.⁷

Sebald’s haunting eloquence also reminds us that the conquest of nature during this second phase, which saw its wholesale conversion from a balanced “order” (Gr. *kosmos*) and habitable dwelling into a monetizable resource and postindustrial wasteland, has been anything but residue-free. Instead, with the principle of combustion having steadily metastasized around the globe (with 37.1 billion tons of carbon dioxide currently being released each year), Sebald’s “heart slowly reduced to embers” can now be found all around us in the form of ecological disaster and the impending collapse it foretells.

Still, until now one final frontier has remained as yet uncrossed, seemingly impervious to our species’ quest for total dominion—namely, our own nature. Which brings me to the third phase of my speculative history, when the combustion of now visibly finite natural resources is supplanted by a comprehensive reengineering of once natural things.⁸ Taking the place of organic nature as a finite resource are its manufactured simulacra: artificially grown organs; 3-D printing of prosthetic limbs; soil depleted of its mineral

contents reconstituted with synthetic fertilizers that offer higher yields but also kill microorganisms; genetically modified crops that allow, for example, tomatoes to ripen after harvesting but also render our gut flora immune to antibiotics; lab-grown meat, or “cell-based food” that reduces water consumption and greenhouse gas emissions but is also laced with heavy metals, microplastics, carcinogens, etc.; and, of course, CRISPR-based editing of the human genome genes for a wide array of therapeutic and “enhancement” purposes, a process whose seemingly unlimited possibilities and dangers stand in inverse proportion to the current, nearly total absence of any regulatory framework for its application.

Let me now turn to our main topic, the simulation of cognitive and emotive processes by means of complex algorithmic processes. Reports about AI inserting itself into new areas of our lives are by now an almost daily fixture on the news cycle. These include activities as diverse as: autonomous driving; medical diagnostics (e.g., interpreting medical images); speeding up drug discovery; performing robotics; writing and checking computer code; document analysis, contract review, composing legal briefs, or predicting odds of recidivism in legal decisions about parole; optimizing response time and analyzing movement patterns of individuals in urban policing; fraud detection, purchase recommendations, dynamic price optimization and customer segmentation in business; AI-operated killer drones; AI-based management of large financial holdings; ride-share optimization; or automatic digital editing of photos and videos (those skin blemishes on the face being airbrushed by AI before the images ever meet the human eye). Add to that the integration of AI into everyday activities, such as smart composition (completing sentences just begun), grammar check, voice-to-text transcription, Google Lens, car crash detection and emergency services activation, algorithmic mapping of the most efficient travel route for EMT services or pizza delivery, translation software, smart speakers (Google Echo, Amazon’s Alexa, et al), etc.

Though hardly exhaustive, the list illustrates how over the past decade or so our individual and collective reliance on AI has grown exponentially. Let me stress, too, that the more critical musings

to which I will now turn ought not to be mistaken as a nostalgic longing for a return to a status *ante quo*. While that may well be my personal preference, such a return is not even remotely conceivable. Still, as with any technology ever invented—from a primitive hammer dating back 3.3 million years ago in Lake Turkana, Kenya (good for breaking up rocks; also good for bashing in your neighbor's skull), all the way to nuclear fission and now AI—the salutary and the menacing aspects of new technologies are inextricably entwined. Such is to be expected given the constitutive ambivalence or, in Augustinian and Pascalian terms, the morally lapsed and intellectually disordered nature of the humanoids who bring such things into being. That said, AI and CRISPR gene-editing may well constitute a watershed moment in human history, throwing into acute relief what Pascal means by the *grandeur et misère de l'homme*. For by effectively replacing our given nature with algorithmic and genetic counterfeits, these technologies may have brought us to a point of no return beyond which this particular technology may end up swallowing its very maker. Not even the pervasive ethical and ecological devastation wrought by modern entrepreneurial and financial capitalism of the past 250 years quite brought us to the threshold where the “goods of efficiency” so utterly threaten to consume those of “excellence” (as MacIntyre calls them), or, to recall Pascal's nomenclature, where the *esprit de géométrie* appears poised to vanquish and expunge the *esprit de finesse*.

II.

Let me now try to highlight some of AI's already observable, corrosive impact on human flourishing, while giving particular attention to the pivotal function of memory within a teleological conception of the human person and, further, hazarding some speculations about what that faculty's continued atrophying will mean for human agency.⁹ Here it is important to note that, both in its operative structure and its phenomenology, human memory is entwined with several other key concepts—among them personhood, dialogue, and community—and a wide spectrum of inner states associated with their experience—particular joy (*dilectio*),

hope, and love. All of these, I maintain, will be decisively jeopardized as AI is rapidly establishing itself as the dominant framework of inquiry.

Ever since the emergence of writing and reading in Mesopotamia, memory and these associated features have proven integral to civilization broadly speaking. A major premise of my reflections, then, is that the pursuit of knowledge—grounded in complex memory functions and realized in dialogical form—is the very telos toward which our species is ordered, both constitutionally and metaphysically. For if indeterminacy is our existential predicament (as Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gehlen among many others contend), our species' ecologically and ethically checkered history to date shows that our existential *misère* cannot be remedied by an unchecked conquest of nature and its consequent de-creation. For any epistemic quest framed as our progressive dominion over nature and ending in its algorithmic and genetic counterfeiting will end up sacrificing the very beings whom it is meant to benefit: namely, us. Or, as C. S. Lewis puts it, "Each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger."¹⁰ Hence, some 2,500 years of tragic narrative from Homer and Sophocles, to Augustine and Dante, to Dostoevsky and Eliot, and above all the Gospels, leave no doubt that a process fueled by selfish desire not only cannot attain a true good but, by its very nature, progressively blinds us to its outlines, thereby foreclosing on the very possibility of its realization. For all its bright and shiny novelty (or, rather, because of it), AI is poised to reconfirm that essentially tragic pattern.

Yet, to say that the human being remains morally and epistemically "still undetermined" (*noch nicht festgestellt*) is not just an ontological datum. For the very being thus constituted also *knows* this fact to be its core predicament. A feeble "thinking reed [*roseau pensant*]" though we are, Pascal maintains that our "entire dignity consists in thought," which provides for the possibility that our existential condition may be fundamentally transformed by our very knowledge of it; as he writes, "Our greatness consists in *knowing* [*connaître*] that we are wretched."¹¹ Indeed, this very insight, attesting as it does to a residual *grandeur* of ours, throws into relief

a fundamental trait of human knowledge. To know (*connaître*) is never just a matter of computational efficiency or propositional cogency. For knowing also means achieving a measure of reflective distance on the knowledge so claimed. Put differently, knowledge is always more than its raw contents; it not only bestows “meaning” on the world of phenomena but also beckons the knower to contemplate the deeper significance of such noetic acts. This shift from “meaning” (*Sinn*) to “contemplation” (*Besinnung*) amounts to a metareflection, a remembering and reimagining of the discrete elements encompassed by our noetic acts, that can (and should) extend to the agent of knowledge herself. Hence, human cognition exhibits a characteristically bifocal view that not only involves the “correspondence between thing and mind” (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) but also a second-order reflection on the “as-yet-undetermined” telos served by the noetic act itself. It is here that Nietzsche’s *noch-nicht-festgestellt* reveals another layer of meaning, not the predicament of our sheer indeterminacy but the appeal of something provisional, a higher-order end for the sake of which human beings strive to remember, rework, reimagine, and recast the things they know. Inasmuch as we seek knowledge, not so much to satisfy our ephemeral curiosity about a given object but, rather, so as to attain a good beyond the *noema* itself, we also come to experience ourselves as capable of a certain kind of grandeur or flourishing after all.

All this is to restate what philosophy, from Plato’s *Meno* to Hegel’s dialectic of “intention” and “internalization” (*Meinen/Erinnern*), had repeatedly argued: namely, that the structure of knowledge is inseparable from the inherently creative and dynamic operation of memory. It was Augustine who formulated the first comprehensive account of human memory. Focusing on both memory’s operative structure and how it registers in experience, Book 10 of the *Confessions* makes clear from the outset that we are looking at something far more intimately entwined with our being than a faculty for information storage and retrieval.¹² To be sure, “the plains and broad palaces of memory” amount to a storehouse. Yet what they contain are not things but “countless images brought in from the things of all kinds that the senses perceive.” The difference is crucial, for unlike things, the images contained in this vast archive

“of all that we ever contemplate” (10.8.12) are ceaselessly recombined by reflective and creative thought. Thus, in this “great hall of my memory . . . I take various different images . . . and, weaving them together with what is past, I envisage actions, consequences and hopes that are to come” (10.8.14). Far from being ephemeral and fading echoes of things, the images “borne by my memory” attest to their reality and enduring presence. Put differently, the image stored in memory is not an inert facsimile of its original but, instead, functions as a medium uniquely capable of preserving and strengthening the latter’s potency. In what seems a contradiction of his earlier claim (“not things . . . but images”), Augustine now insists: “Nor is it images I carry but the things themselves.” Yet the paradox is resolved once we understand that the “things” are now remembered entities, things *known* in and through the medium of the image and, consequently, imbued with almost limitless plasticity and potentiality.

Among the inexhaustible inventory held in memory are included “all the elements of the liberal arts that I have acquired and not yet forgotten, . . . the nature of literature, the art of disputation, how many types of question there are—whatever I know of these is in my memory. I retain an image, having left the thing itself outside” (10.9.16). The process is not conscious and deliberate but, on the contrary, overwhelmingly unconscious. Thus, “while musing on whence and by what route [things] did enter my memory,” Augustine finds them to be always already there: “They were there before I learnt them” (10.10.17). From which follows what I take to be Augustine’s most far-reaching claim:

We find that “learning” those things whose images we do not imbibe through our senses but perceive inwardly, through themselves, as they are, without images, is nothing other than by means of thought and reflection to gather together and to arrange the things that are indeed contained within the memory, but which lie far and wide, in no set order. . . . I must drive them together again, to make them knowable; that is to say, I must herd them together from where they are scattered. Hence the verb “to think” (*cogito*). The words “to think” (*cogito*) and “to herd” (*cogo*) are related, as are “to act” (*ago*) “to shake up” (*agito*), and “to do” (*facio*) and “to repeat” (*factito*). (10.11.18)

Ultimately, the scope of memory is coextensive with mental functioning *tout court*; for not only things but all “my states of mind also are contained in my memory,” not, to be sure, as “the mind has them at the time when it experiences, but in another, far different manner” (10.13.20). Memory, Augustine insists, enables us to progress from suffering various affective states (sadness, gladness, pain) to developing a considered perspective on them. In memory-based reflection, we process these states, thereby freeing ourselves from being trapped and consumed by them in ways that hint at Augustine’s momentary proximity to the Stoics. As he puts it, “Memory, then, is like a stomach to the mind” (10.14.21). Then again, echoing Plato’s *Meno*, Augustine finds cognition to be inextricably entwined with recognition. For the entire structure of our language and the very possibility of intelligible predication pivots on our grasping the difference between experience and its conception: “I can speak the words ‘physical pain,’ but as long as I am not in pain, it is not present with me. Yet were its image not in my memory, I would not know what to say when, in the course of a disputation, I distinguished it from pleasure” (10.15.23).

In what ways, then, do AI and social media atrophy human, memory-based cognition? Any response here ought to be guided by our basic existential situation of which I spoke at the outset: that is, everything human beings empirically *are*—which, to be sure, is not all they are summoned to be—has been drawn from their “not-yet determined” nature, which is to say, is the result of a continuous effort, there being no biotope into which our species is organically fitted. At the same time, recalling the central antinomy with which I began, human *noesis* cannot be reduced to an outright conquest of the *noema*. To know things in nature is not to supplant but to participate in them. Human cognition is not defined by just its contents, but the fact that the knower is capable of developing a considered, reflective outlook on the noetic act as such. Well beyond its assertion of mastery over phenomena, knowledge also entails the knower’s self-transcendence. As Robert Spaemann notes, if the human person were but the virtual linchpin of noetic acts, it “would be no more than a function of the act itself.”¹³ On this view, the subject would be but the virtual center of computational or

hermeneutic acts, “capable of memory and anticipation [*Erinnerung und Vorausschau*],” to be sure, but not yet properly a “subject’ in the sense of a free, spontaneous beginning and origin, but only an integrating function” more or less in the formal sense of Kantian “apperception.”¹⁴ Conversely, if in the manner of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche one were to deny the subject all “power of theoretical reflection and theoretical intention,” the resulting “blind ‘drive’ [*Trieb*]” would now preclude even memory and anticipation.¹⁵ Neither scenario, however, adequately describes human agency. In fact, Spaemann continues,

One and the same subject thinks and wills. If a subject is capable of both theoretical and practical intentionality and (still more important) of a love that can rank intentions preferentially, and if these acts are independent variables, then the subject cannot be conceived as a mere function of acts but must have an independent standing [as a human person]. The subject must be seen as a spontaneous initiator, a being-in-itself [*spontaner Anfang und Selbstsein*], known by its acts but not to be identified with any of them.¹⁶

A distinctive trait of human personhood thus concerns this capacity to “put a distance between him- or herself as subject and the whole content of his or her consciousness.”¹⁷ What distinguishes human personhood from the transactional logic of Descartes’s *res cogitans* is that its noetic acts cannot be reduced to a strictly computational procedure. Rather, well beyond its operational dynamics, “thinking” also means “having” thoughts, which is to say, finding oneself in a position to develop a considered “stance” (*Einstellung*) vis-à-vis thought’s immediate contents; and to do so is to appraise the truth value of our propositions not just relative to their object but also vis-à-vis an antecedent greater good that can neither be posited by our will nor arise, as it were by default, from the fluctuations of thought. For the process of thinking and its reflective evaluation is by definition an intratemporal affair, whereas the telos or *summum bonum* for the sake of which we engage in reflective thought and from which our noetic acts derive their true significance ultimately falls outside the order of time.

III.

It is here that fundamental differences between human thinking and algorithmic computation, however sophisticated, begin to emerge. To be clear, the difference at issue has not to do with the *efficiency* of thought processes but concerns their ontological standing. For by its very nature, all human effort is experienced as a process unfolding in time and, thus, crucially relying on memory. This not only holds true where we find ourselves engaged, both affectively and analytically, with texts or works of art. It also applies to, say, learning a foreign language and all manner of processes defined by our infinitely varied modalities of attention, analysis, synthesis, patient reflection, creative expression, and logical argumentation. Suppose, for example, that a technology were to become available whereby the entire lexical and grammatical structure of a heretofore foreign language were to be “downloaded” into us in a matter of seconds. Precisely the efficiency of such a technological marvel would deprive us of everything that goes into speaking and thinking well within a given language. We would thus be in possession of a resource without any telos for its use. For lacking would be those innumerable patterns of moral, social, and spiritual discernment, absent which socially pragmatic and effective language use is simply impossible. Where human beings are concerned, it should be obvious that such skills can only be acquired over time by speakers patiently internalizing and creatively refashioning them in both memory and practice. To speak a language is not to work with a formal definition of a dance but, in fact, to be dancing—with another human person—alternately leading and responding, seeking clarity by a host of different formal means (examples, metaphors, parables, irony, stories, etc.), and gently reminding one another of the overarching good for the sake of which we engage in the aleatory practice of seeking mutual understanding to begin with.

As a final example, let us consider what appears to be an increasingly common occurrence: a human being having a “conversation” with an AI system. Whatever the content of such an exchange, its most consistent trait is bound to be the notably affectless nature of the “responses” generated by the AI interlocutor. While the

exchange that eventuates may formally resemble a “conversation,” the fact that one party operates algorithmically renders the event little more than a simulation of dialogue, a game of solitaire with words. For what will transpire is a purely extensional harvesting and recycling of information and a gaming of possible propositional moves and countermoves. The human interlocutor will likely experience the exchange as a virtual sparring of sorts, a contest of cleverness, wittiness, or logical prowess. Wholly bereft of empathy (there being no community) and consequently incapable of generating joy in the human participant, the exchange instead ends up concealing, normalizing, and compounding our existential isolation. A formal equivalent of the mindless and interminable scrolling through social media sites, such “conversation” with AI has, in fact, no telos at all and instead leaves us mired in Augustinian-Heideggerian time as empty distention (*Erstreckung*).

By contrast, we take it as a given that a conversation with another person has a rhythm, just as we notice that something’s awry when there is no such rhythm, no music, no beauty of innuendo or inflection, in which case, to quote T. S. Eliot again, we will have “had the experience but missed the meaning.”¹⁸ Characteristic of AI and social media—wherein time either contracts to milliseconds or expands to the empty *durée* of the infinite scroll—is a “de-rhythmization of life” on which Baudelaire was among the first to comment.¹⁹ Inasmuch as an exchange with AI deprives us of any rhythmic and meaningful experience of time, it will also be drained of all affective quality, incapable of generating joy or strengthening our sense of belonging to a community. The result will be literally unmemorable, all the more so because the verbal transaction is likely to be “saved” and stored in some remote data storage center anyway. (Try asking your teenage child to recall specifics of a chat with AI an hour earlier, and you will be sorely disappointed.) Along with memory, joy, and community, any sense of fulfillment in dialogue with another person is bound to melt away once we enter into a-teleological exchanges with AI where memory-based discovery and interpersonal dialogue has been replaced by its algorithmic counterfeit. As C. S. Lewis had pointed out some eighty years ago, “Man’s conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its

consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man."²⁰ As we now find, the result of that final "triumph," of algorithmic processes over the experience of meaning, reduces the so-called "user" of AI to strictly epiphenomenal status, no longer a person but a mere node within the system itself, who, for the most part unthinkingly, provides it with further data and algorithmic possibilities. By contrast, true learning is a process with its own, distinctive rhythms and realized over significant expanses of time. Seneca's insight, "If ever you want to find out what a thing really is, entrust it to time" (*De Ira* 3.12.4), reminds us of what we have intuitively always known: that learning cannot be reduced to the instantaneous acquisition or retrieval of information any more than truth can be reduced to ferreting out logical or computational errors, areas in which AI is indeed a powerful tool (e.g., search engines; writing and error-checking software). For as soon as we enter the domain of learning and inquiry proper—the domain governed by Pascal's *esprit de finesse*—the putative efficiency of AI is bound to obscure or corrupt the true end of learning: the flourishing of the learner herself.

At this point, an objection to my argument may well be raised: some might argue that today's adolescents are liable to accept the incursion of AI into their everyday lives neither with alarm nor, indeed, with any clearly defined response at all. Instead, the presence of AI may seem an entirely normal and integral feature of their lifeworld, a case of second nature, as it were. Already, children in middle school are beginning to replace their human friends with chatbots as conversational partners; and just over the horizon there is the prospect of AI substituting for the human therapist or the private tutor. Certainly, it would be a mistake to underestimate the ease and rapidity with which the young generation now coming of age is assimilating AI; and much of what my age cohort may consider alien and dystopian is already being accepted, and often actively sought out, as a normal feature of everyday social practice. Yet just because something is not consciously experienced as a loss does not mean that a loss has not been suffered. Thus, without disputing in the least the myriad ways in which AI insinuates itself into the lifeworld of our young generation, I consider these developments extremely dangerous precisely because AI is for the most

part metastasizing into the lifeworld of the under-25 generation so quietly that those most susceptible to its appeal may never realize just how much their ability to distinguish the human from its algorithmic counterfeit has been atrophied. Nor for that matter may that generation properly register just how much its ability to feel love, friendship, joy, empathy, grief, and any variety of complex emotional states is being diminished. For the cultivation of such responses is integral only to authentically interpersonal relations, where there is an implicit sense of reciprocal moral accountability, which is evidently not the case in human interactions with an AI.

Likewise, to counter my claim that replacing a human person with an AI conversation partner normalizes and compounds our existential isolation, by suggesting this isolation, however objectively real, may no longer be experienced as such and therefore should not trouble us does not hold water. For one thing, to acquiesce (in the manner of Pope's "Whatever is, is right") in technological change merely because it demonstrably happens is to deprive human, reflective thought of all counterfactual power. To be sure, something peculiar, indeed bizarre, appears to happen when dependency on AI has become so pervasive that an entire generation, ensconced and quasi-hypnotized in digital cocoons of its own making, fails to realize that is about to be deprived of a vast spectrum of emotional and reflective self-awareness. Yet in effect, if not by design, the proliferation of AI in everyday life and practice is bound to contract the range of human experience and attention to such practices and phenomena as can be algorithmically simulated. At the same time, much of what infuses our existence with meaning, (not of a propositional but of an experiential kind) can never be simulated. Thus, a lifeworld overwhelmingly defined by AI will estrange human beings from the *texture* of life: the scent of a cherry tree in spring; the distant rumble of a summer cloudburst with its scent of fresh-cut grass and the tickling sensation of its warm raindrops striking one's skin; the autumnal sound of Canada geese vanishing over the horizon at dusk; the becalming silence and otherworldly glow of a snow-covered city; the lushness of the grape bursting against the palate; the soft embrace and endlessly changing facial expressions of young infants; a spouse's knowing, sidelong

glance, and so forth. In short, in a world dominated by AI-human interactions, there will be a dramatic loss of the myriad frequencies on which human beings until now were able to receive signals. No doubt, some of these phenomena can be simulated, at least visually and acoustically, but those who only encounter them in their algorithmic counterfeit will no longer understand the infinite richness with which these *qualia* are experienced in our three-dimensional lifeworld. Now, the loss of texture of which I speak surreptitiously erases the ontological difference between mind and world, between an infinitely variegated and miraculously cohesive “order” (*kosmos*) and a human, embodied consciousness invited to participate in that order. Once the “real” is being supplanted by AI-engineered simula-cra, human beings will increasingly conceive reality as something exclusively custom-made. As a result, the sense of the world as gift and as the source of infinite adventure and discovery gradually fades and ultimately mutates into a notion of a wholly predictable and endlessly malleable resource over which—having “made” it—we naturally claim unlimited dominion.

In the end, what we say about AI, how we appraise its potential and dangers, may shed less light on this particular phenomenon than it throws into relief the concept of the human person that tacitly underwrites how we conceive of our very existence. In ways almost too obvious to need retelling, AI and gene-editing appear to me as the culmination of a four-centuries-old attempt at redescribing and gradually reengineering the human being, itself (as I’ve tried to argue here) part of a much longer historical project of securing total dominion over nature that, at last, finds itself confronted with the final frontier, our own nature.²¹ Manifestly postlapsarian in its endless internal divisions and disorder, our paradoxical condition also shines forth in this present dynamic, with humanity at once feverishly engaged in conquering its own nature while at the same time recoiling from the myriad consequences, foreseeable or as yet incalculable, that “success” in this endeavor would entail. However things may turn out, this much at least is clear: fueling our quest for total dominion over all of nature’s abundant gifts has been a peculiarly skewed, antimetaphysical and ateleological conception of freedom as total emancipation from all transcendent

givenness.²² Put differently, the reigning assumption all along has been that in conquering all of nature, our own included, we shall at last have shuffled off any residual transcendent norms and, consequently, any sense of gratitude and accountability other than what is enshrined in legal terms or negotiated in the netherworld of politics. Now, should such a state of total immanence and technological control over our nature ever be reached, the algorithmic or genetic counterfeiting of being will have abolished not only the gift of being that humankind received at its origin. For, along with the wondrous otherness and inexhaustible riches of nature *qua* transcendent Creation, what will also have vanished is the telos towards which human thinking, learning, and dialogue are implicitly ordered, thus stripping what had once been the human person of the joy, hope, and love so uniquely experienced when we engage in these activities.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor speaks of a “hypergood” that turns out to be “ineliminable from our best account” of the moral life, “one where we are capable of growth from a ‘normal’, or ‘original’, or primitive’, or ‘average’ condition, in which we acknowledge and orient ourselves by a certain range of goods, to a recognition of a good which has incomparably greater dignity than these.” *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modernity Identity* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 69.
2. See *Urmensch und Spätkultur: Philosophische Ergebnisse und Aussagen* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2004), esp. 21, 33, 46.
3. Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 29, 32; (trans. corrected).
4. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 193.
5. S. T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 349.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996 [1940]), 71.
7. W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998), 170.
8. I will not dwell on a third strategy also currently en vogue: namely, to seize control over our own nature by asserting lexical, medical, and legal

dominion over the human person's gender. The question here is not whether biological sex *determines* gender outright (a debatable point, to be sure), but whether biological sex should still be granted any relevance whatsoever when it comes to understanding human, gender-specific identity, something current trans-activists vehemently dispute. Upon closer inspection, the claim that human beings can determine their very nature or, in Scholastic terms, their *quiddity* à la carte, as it were, proves logically incoherent. For only such a being can "identify" as anything which already "is," already has a nature. Identifying as X cannot create one's being but can only ever ascribe to it some secondary quality or state: e.g. "I'm tall; I'm a father; or I'm seriously confused." Put differently, our nature is not contingent on what we predicate of it but, on the contrary, is the condition absent which we could never predicate anything at all. Hence, to self-identify, in some of the more extreme cases, no longer as a human person at all (regardless of gender) but as a feline or other animal will strike any rational observer as intuitively absurd. For in such cases, even the most basic empirical/physical criteria for the proposed redefinition of the human person are quite evidently not met, thus confirming what basic logic also tells us: namely, that a performative act of self-definition cannot change the nature of the subject engaged in that act and that acts of self-identification can only ever be understood and evaluated with reference to the already existing nature of the person engaged in that act.

Far from remedying this impasse, recent medical and pharmaceutical procedures designed to let an individual change his/her biological sex only compound an already paradoxical situation. For driving the use of such technologies is the assumption that in so "transitioning" the individual's physical being and psychological self-image will at last be brought into full alignment. Yet that assumption curiously reinforces the very fact so vehemently disputed by social-constructivist accounts of gender: namely, that gender is grounded in biological sex after all. Additionally, it should also be noted that until the process of transitioning has been completed, the person undergoing it cannot possibly know whether he/she will henceforth flourish in ways they anticipate; for, to say it again, it is logically impossible to know *a priori* what it would be like to have (or, rather, *be*) a different nature, just as Thomas Nagel demonstrated long ago, we can never truly know what it is like to be a bat.

9. For a fuller account of the teleological model of human agency, see among others: Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something,'* trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and my own *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), as well as the works by Maritain, MacIntyre, Anscombe, Ratzinger, and others cited there.

10. Lewis, *Abolition*, 58–9.
11. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Pierre Sellier (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011), nos. 146, 231, 232.
12. Quotes will follow the Philip Burton translation of Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2001).
13. Spaemann, *Persons*, 60. / Ger. *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen 'etwas' und 'jemand'* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1996), 69.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Spaemann, *Persons*, 60. / Ger. *Personen*, 69.
18. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages*, 2.
19. See Pascal Michon, "New Artistic Rhythm Practices and Conceptions (1857–1897)" in *Rhuthmos* 1 (June 2016), <http://rhuthmos.eu//spip.php?article1770>.
20. Lewis, *Abolition*, 68.
21. Among the better-known waystations of this antihumanist, indeed *inhuman* project would be: the feral naturalism of Hobbes's *Leviathan*; the skeptical emotivism of Hume's *Treatise*; Adam Smith's protobehaviorist construction of moral sentiments as a kind of mimetic theater; the metaphysical pessimism of Schopenhauer; Chernyshevsky's crude and Nietzsche's far more sophisticated, antimetaphysical nihilism; the pseudo-empirical behaviorism of Watson and Skinner; and a determinism anchored in genetic or algorithmic models the dramatic rise of which we have witnessed over the past three decades or so. It is a long and complex story that selectively I have tried to unfold elsewhere. See my *Minding the Modern*, esp. pt. 3, 185–413.
22. On the Christian understanding of Creation as gift and irreducible givenness, and on that concept's reexamination in modern phenomenology, above all Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) and Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).