From Artificial Intelligence to the Immortality of the Soul

At the end of 2022, ChatGPT was released to the general public; it is a software program trained to reproduce human language and to answer any question it is asked. The fact that this software has learned to offer non-predetermined responses, thanks to algorithmic training using neural networks and the vast amount of information fed into it, has put the expression *artificial intelligence* (AI) on everyone's lips. We now have a tool capable of composing everything from an unpublished romantic poem in the style of Goethe to an academic paper comparing two authors who have never previously been studied together—and doing so better than 99% of mortals! A program like this raises many questions for us: is AI really intelligent? Where is its novelty? What will be the consequences of its being widely used? Will it help to improve our world? What can we expect? In this paper, then, we venture to offer some answers that may be different from those that ChatGPT would provide us.

The Problem Lies not in the Truth, but in the Plausibility

One of the most important debates surrounding ChatGPT—and all Large Language Models (LLMs)—is not whether its statements are true or false, or whether it is wrong often or seldom*,* but whether its language is so similar to human language that a chat conversation is indistinguishable from a real conversation. Theorist Ramón López de Mántaras wrote recently that the problem with ChatGPT is its anthropomorphism, which gives us a false sense of realism. We believe

ChatGPT not because it tells the truth or something close to it, but because it imitates human conversation perfectly; its answers are very well written, and it conveys credibility. We should always keep in mind, however, that AI does not know why it knows what it knows, nor does it understand the answers it gives. Its responses seek simply to simulate human language so that, after a phrase like "The best soccer player in history is...," it will respond according to what he has learned from similar phrases written on the Internet. Using probabilistic criteria, it will add to the phrase one word after another, guaranteeing that what it says makes sense; it will even appear to have formed an opinion about the matter. But what lies behind it is, according to computational linguistics professor Emily Bender, is nothing but "a stochastic parrot."

In the face of a tool like this, confusion is guaranteed, and we can be certain that it will be used to take advantage of our vulnerabilities. AI significantly increases the "post-truth" that is already so much a part of the digital world and the social networks. In view of the many possibilities of manipulation, emotional blackmail, and misuse of unverified information, citizens need to be given good criteria for discernment so that they will view with suspicion whatever they read and have sufficient common sense to prevent themselves from being manipulated through the information they receive. In short, we will have to be more skeptical and less trusting.

The emergence of AI may well give rise to a definitive epistemic shift in our scale of values, such that truth itself ceases to be important and yields instead to verisimilitude, that is, the appearance of truth.

The Material Unsustainability of AI

Much of the debate generated around AI has to do with its biases and the dangers they present. Because AI is a black box (we do not know why it says what it says or does what it does), we are concerned that it will end up reproducing the same types of discrimination that occur *de facto* in society. If AI is racist or sexist, it is clear that it will be so because that's what our society is. AI is not really autonomous, and it cannot replace our moral judgment; even less can it improve it. Our concern about the bias of the algorithms—and especially of the data fed into them—is caused by the techno-optimistic naiveté that exists: the belief that technology has come to solve our moral dilemmas, to make us better people. We cannot expect more from AI than we expect from ourselves.

A second widespread concern has to do with the fact that AI can ultimately replace human labor. A recent article in *Fortune* magazine discussed what is known as the *productivity paradox*: the digital changes introduced since the mid-nineties, contrary to what was expected, have not brought about large increases in productivity. In other words, having digital technology does not make us more efficient, nor does it really eliminate workplaces; it only transforms them. Rather, the questions we must ask are the following: 1) who benefits from these technologies? and 2) to what extent do they allow more and more power to accumulate in ever fewer hands?

Another topic that has been very little discussed but that badly needs to be debated is the unsustainability of AI. When discussing this issue, computer scientists are most concerned about the computa-

tional capacity needed to train AI and keep it running: the quantity of calculations used to train neural networks has multiplied by one hundred million (100,000,000) just in the last ten years. It may seem to us innocuous and almost magical, but asking ChatGPT to explain a very funny joke requires it to use so many servers, so many calculations, and so much energy that extensive and universal use of it becomes unfeasible. Diversions of this sort have a computational cost that is impossible to assume on a large scale.

An Anthropological and Theological Reading

The most interesting assessments of this phenomenon always consider the human side. How will we humans relate to AI? We recently watched, along with the students of a seminar on scientific thinking, an episode of the *Black Mirror* series titled "Be right back." It is exactly ten years old. A young woman has lost her partner to death. A company has developed a technology that allows her—by recovering the dead partner's information in videos, photos and social networks—to simulate a chat conversation with the deceased. Later the woman is able to have a telephone conversation with him, and finally, she can relate to a robot identical to the dead person. As you can imagine, this contrived return of the deceased does not really satisfy the living person; to the contrary, it isolates and destabilizes her, making her incapable of resuming her life. It sinks her further into a pit without light.

This feat is already possible today. LLMs like ChatGPT can give us perti-nent information that allows us to simulate a chat conversation with a deceased person, such as with John Fitzgerald Kennedy or Freddie Mercury. Other tools already developed can divide their voices into three-second slices and use them to simulate a conversation that sounds real. So what now? If such magic is already possible, are we obliged to develop it? Imagine how much money could be generated by a claim like this: "Talk to your deceased love ones on the phone again!" How many people would pay for this service? As macabre as the idea may sound, we are only a few months away from knowing the answer.

The best reflection I've heard on this matter was shared with me by a student: "The problem is that woman was not even been given the opportunity to grieve." This raises a most relevant point: technology allows us to escape from what scares us so that we don't have to face anything that threatens us or poses a real challenge. But that reveals a poor understanding of human anthropology. Remember Hölderlin's dictum: "Wherever there is adversity, there is born that which will save us." We want to save human beings from having to be human. We are not doing people any favors by denying them the possibility of mourning in that which forms the core of their life. The death of a loved one can be the worst of misfortunes, but that is exactly what life is about. As Josep Maria Esquirol states so well, it is not a matter of closing the infinite wound that constitutes our being, but of learning to "accompany and respond to its excess." With each technological crutch we add to our daily lives, we become smaller, weaker, and more inept—in short, less human.

There is no doubt that AI indulges in a certain Gnosticism, the old Christian heresy that salvation can be achieved through knowledge and enlightenment. Gnostics reject the material world and even the body as imperfect. Today, the cult of data and the goal of transcending our mortal life by pouring ourselves "into the cloud" can be considered a contemporary version of the Gnostic heresy. People cultivate the illusion that, even after the body ends, our soul will be perpetuated, even if it is based on bits. Will AI be the gateway to the immortality of the soul? *Technolatry* as religion is the Gnosticism of the 21st century. Be that as it may, the resurrection of the flesh is not the same as the immortality of the soul. The former is not and will never be possible; the latter is already within our reach, thanks to chat programs that can make conversations with dead people credible. We need to protect ourselves. In these times of widespread secularization, where nothing is seen to be sacred, the possibility of transcendence has been transferred to the digital field. We seek salvation through technology, but we won't find it. What we will find instead is a nightmare of confusion; we will be disconnected from our nature and unable to understand what it means to be the finite beings we are.

Regulate AI and Provide Ourselves With Tools For Discernment

Nobody denies that AI can be very usefully applied to medical diagnosis, climate prediction, or the prevention of driving accidents. But it should not be used at any price. Expressions such "AI is here to stay," "AI is neutral," or "Everything depends on how it is used" betray a certain myopia in the way we view the effects of technology on our lives. The fascination generated by technology is often accompanied by a naive discourse, and this is fueled in turn by the huge investments being made in search of profits. The good news is that we still have time to limit the worst consequences and to avoid preying on the vulnerabilities of the human soul. The bad news is that, once a technology is developed, it transforms our environment, and its mere existence inevitably changes the way we relate to the world.

The best personal antidote is to cultivate our capacity for discernment; that is, we should understand what we are doing and why we are doing it: "Where am I going and for what reason?" That was the question Saint Ignatius asked himself. Only our intentionality, the fact that our words and actions are endowed with meaning, makes us different from machines today. As a society, we need to start regulating each new digital development with legislation and ethical protocols; there are billions of dollars invested in the technology, waiting for an economic return and ready to take advantage of all our weaknesses. Would you like to speak again on WhatsApp with your sister who died last year? You can have it with a click. Will we allow this type of thing to develop as a business? I hope we are smart enough—sorry, human enough—not to let this happen.

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