

Challenged by AI, what makes us human?

Pope Leo XIV recently circulated an essay (encyclical) recognising the value of AI and at the same time warning readers about its dangers. The title of the encyclical is *Magnifica Humanitas (Magnificent humanity) – safeguarding the human person in the light of AI*. Our Thinking Allowed meeting is looking at what makes us human and enables us to flourish as human beings rather than the pros and cons of AI, but our thinking can be sharpened by what Pope Leo writes on the subject. The notes provide background to the current debate and are meant to stimulate thinking. They are not meant to direct our conversation.

Here are some points from the Pope's writing. I have underlined phrases that speak directly to our topic.

1. *Magnifica Humanitas* has an underlying premise: technology is not “a force antagonistic to humanity” , nor is it “inherently evil” . However, “technology is never neutral, because it takes on the characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate, and use it.”
2. It is important to remember the dignity of the person, created in the image and likeness of God. It is important to recall this since “the pressure of new ideologies or certain highly powerful interests” can reduce the human person to “a resource to be used and exploited”.
3. In the digital age, social justice requires ensuring fair access to opportunities for all people, protecting the most vulnerable, combating hatred and disinformation, and subjecting the use of technologies to public oversight, “so that the guiding principle is not solely profit but the dignity of every person and the common good of all people” (80).
4. The most powerful technology is not necessarily the best. AI can imitate and simulate the person, but it does not possess a moral conscience, empathy, or affective, relational or spiritual capabilities.
5. AI must be “disarmed ” in order to free it from the mentality of military, economic, and cognitive competition. “To disarm means discrediting the assumption that technical power automatically confers the right to govern,” he says. “To disarm does

not mean rejecting technology, but preventing it from dominating [and enslaving] humanity.” [...] BC’s inclusion.

6. Pope Leo XIV then discusses the theme of human freedom in an age when digital platforms are designed to capture users’ time and exploit their vulnerabilities. He reiterates the need to strengthen each person’s interior freedom, while also confronting the risk of social control arising from the mass collection of data and the use of algorithmic systems. Profiling, predicting, and directing behaviour, he says, is “a new form of power” (171) that risks discriminating against the weakest.

7. There is a danger of humanity becoming a victim of its own achievements.

8. The quality of a civilization is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer, by its ability to recognize the other as a face not merely as a function. The ability to care for one another is a fundamental dimension of our humanity, one that is learned and mastered through lived experience. Reading stories to a child, offering company to an elderly person and arranging a home so that it is welcoming are simple gestures often rooted in family life.

9. Our relationship with life seems to be in crisis today. Everything that appears as a “limit” — incapacity, illness, old age, suffering, vulnerability — tends to be seen primarily as a defect to be corrected, rather than as a reality through which our humanity matures and opens itself to relationship. And yet we must remember that humanity flourishes not *despite* limitations, but often *through* them.

10. It is precisely within our limitations that the following find a place: compassion, as well as a sincere concern for the needs of others; a generosity that can emerge even in the midst of darkness and failure; spiritual experience and the worship of God. We see this at many moments when our limits become tangible: when we face rejection, when we suffer the illness or loss of a loved one, when we encounter our own weakness or failure. Mysteriously, it is precisely in such moments that we can discover a new wisdom.

11. Does AI “make human life on earth ‘more human’ in every aspect of that life? Does it make it more worthy of human beings?”

12. Guiding principle for technological processes: it is not enough for artificial intelligence to make us more efficient or connected; it must also serve to build a universal human family, with shared rights and duties, where digital proximity becomes a real opportunity for encounter and mutual care.

13. At this point, however, a subtle temptation may emerge, namely the thought that the problems are too big and we are too small, and that our choices, therefore, cannot make a difference. This is a polite form of resignation, often disguised as realism. Certainly, not everyone has the same power to make a difference. There are those who govern, make investment decisions, lead institutions, conduct research, educate, produce or provide information, and then there are those who only seem to live their daily lives. Yet, no one is without responsibility. We all have our own areas for action, and it is precisely there — and nowhere else — that we must choose whether to fuel the mentality of force (even if only through indifference, cynicism, lies or hatred), or to preserve the mindset of peace (with truth, moderation, closeness and care).

So, what is distinctive about human beings? What enables us to flourish as human beings?

BC

Wider reflections

The latest reported scare story, from AI insiders, is to the effect that AI could (my emphasis) have a ten percent chance of killing all humans within ten years. Some serious and qualified scientists firmly repudiate that conclusion and the underlying evidence, but the story has hit headlines.

Pope Leo says that AI must serve Humanity. Can that prescription be filled? Only, perhaps, by the almost impossible ideal of the world coming together to agree on AI regulation that would apply, and be enforced globally. It was that kind of ideal that the framers of the United Nations Charter, meeting in Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, and the representatives of 50 countries, the signatories, meeting in June 1945 in San Francisco, had in mind. The reality of the compromises, inevitable compromises, made in the design and structure of the UN and its Security Council produced an organisation whose power and influence, especially in what used to be called the First World, has declined over the years, to a state in

which the UN is only in some respects more effective than its predecessor, the 1920-1946 League of Nations (which excluded the USA and from which the USSR was expelled).

The leaders of the Western World, as they used to be called now face a new world order – or rather disorder, notably since the 1989-90 end of the Cold War (though did it end?).

One of the reasons why the UN cannot achieve the aims most of its Security Council may set is that vetoes are possible. Vetoes happen when the member nations interests are neither the same nor closely aligned. In the case of AI it may be possible to argue, perhaps in a new body with a limited brief, that leading countries' aims are, or can be made, to align. There will be differences, e.g. where China and the US, for example, have strong and competing commercial interests in AI development and commercialisation; but it may be possible to argue for alignment on the main issue of regulating AI so that its possible threats to humanity can and must be eliminated or severely and sufficiently reduced.

Brian's point 5 above is also relevant here. That form of disarmament would be difficult to secure, but if "technology" can be made or accepted to be approximately equal among countries, as measured by chip-making and levels of AI development and capability, then there might just be grounds for hope.

At a fairly recent party, HM The King gave a personal letter to the CEO of Nvidia, the US and arguably world leader in AI computing. One might well imagine that the subject of *Thinking Allowed's* subject for 14th September 2026 was addressed in that letter. Not only The King's recent two superlative speeches in Washington might have given extra weight to his letter.

Could The King lead a world movement towards agreed global regulation? Doubtful, on practical grounds, but his views and weight could be influential, as they may be in COP.

If not our King, then who?

The CEO of Nvidia in concert with his competitors? The US Secretary of State in concert with his Chinese opposite number? A small number of Prime Ministers or Foreign Ministers? A small group of retired world leaders? (Might the UK offer John Major and Gordon Brown?)

An international group, also small of accepted academic experts at professorial level? One thinks of the Pugwash Conferences (of academics) on Science and World Affairs nuclear and other WMDs, which since 1957 have warned that the world has to choose between

ending war and ending civilisation, have laboured in the nuclear weapons vineyard and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995. Pugwash has not changed the world radically, IMHO, but academic input is surely essential.

An ecumenical group (including e.g. the Russian Orthodox Church), building on Pope Leo's First Encyclical, Chapter 4, with a mandate to help humanity, but with very senior political and academic advisers from the USA, China and a European country or two?

How to cover the Moslem world?

Who?

If an effort is to be made and succeed, it requires the strongest and most statesmanlike power, influence, and early action.

In the light (if any) of the above, Humanity is the most at risk and would be the main beneficiary of any success. How does humanity differ from what AI may become?

The above theorising apart, the US and China are already tentatively beginning bilateral talks on AI regulation.

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