

Editorial

Psychospiritual Analysis of Human Consciousness in *Magnifica Humanitas*

What does it mean to remain human when human intelligence is no longer uniquely human? This question becomes increasingly urgent as Artificial intelligence is shifting from a simple helper tool into systems that reason and make decisions on their own. Because of this shift, intelligence is no longer uniquely human. OpenAI Chief Scientist Jakub Pachocki warns that future AI may soon surpass human intellect and described the coming transition as one in which humanity may encounter an “alien intellect exceeding our own.” He argues that AI development must preserve human agency and an intrinsic value to being human, while acknowledging that alignment—the challenge of ensuring that increasingly capable AI systems remain consistent with human values—has not yet been adequately solved.

This contemporary concern provides an important entry point into Pope Leo XIV’s *Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*. The encyclical’s central concern is explicit: safeguarding the human person amid technological transformation. The encyclical does not reject technological advancement; rather, it asks that technological development remain oriented towards the dignity and flourishing of the human person.

Intelligence is Not the Same as Meaning

Psychologically, human beings are not merely information-processing organisms. They interpret their experiences, construct identities, establish goals and seek significance. Steger (2012, p. 165) describes meaning as “the web of connections, understandings, and

interpretations” through which people comprehend their experiences and direct their energies towards a desired future. Meaning provides a sense that one’s life matters, makes sense and is more than the accumulation of individual moments.

Research commonly conceptualises meaning in terms of coherence, purpose and significance (King & Hicks, 2021). These dimensions are important because they reveal something that intelligence alone cannot capture. Intelligence may help us solve a problem, but ‘meaning’ concerns whether the problem is worth solving and toward what end our capacities should be directed. This distinction resonates strongly with *Magnifica Humanitas*. The encyclical recognises technological development as an expression of human creativity but warns against allowing technology and efficiency to become the ultimate criteria by which humanity is judged. It argues that human intelligence, together with conscience and freedom, must remain responsible for guiding technological development and determining its use and limits. Perhaps, therefore, intelligence should be understood not as the epitome of human existence but as one of the capacities through which human beings can enhance life. The danger begins when the capacity to know, calculate and create becomes confused with the question of what a human life is ultimately for.

The Presence and Search for Meaning

Steger’s distinction between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning provides another useful psychological perspective. Presence of meaning refers to the extent to which individuals experience their lives as meaningful; search for meaning refers to the active desire and effort to establish or increase one’s understanding of meaning, significance and purpose. These dimensions are related but not identical.

Importantly, searching for meaning does not necessarily mean that one lacks all meaning. People may search because their existing understanding is being challenged, because circumstances have changed, or because they wish to deepen their sense of purpose. Empirical work, nevertheless, suggests that the relationship between search and well-being is complex: in Steger and colleagues’ earlier studies, people who lacked meaning tended to search for it, whereas search itself did not necessarily produce meaning. The contemporary encounter with artificial intelligence may be understood as a collective search for meaning. As machines increasingly perform tasks once

associated with uniquely human intelligence, humanity is being forced to reconsider what remains essential to human existence. Especially with the recent events surrounding rogue AI models, many AI researchers and developers have been trying to ensure AI models keep their users' best interests in mind.

Intelligence and Humility in the Age of AI

The theological imagery of *Magnifica Humanitas* deepens this question. The encyclical places the Tower of Babel alongside the rebuilding of Jerusalem as two contrasting images of humanity.

Beyond Babel: Intelligence and Humility in the Age of AI

The imagery of Babel and Jerusalem offers a striking lens for reflecting on human creativity. Babel symbolises a project of uniformity and self-assertion, where power is pursued apart from God. Jerusalem, by contrast, embodies rebuilding through communion, responsibility, and relationship. These contrasting visions illuminate the perennial tension between self-sufficiency and dependence. The Eden narrative adds another dimension. Genesis 3 depicts humanity's temptation to define its own destiny, with the serpent's promise that humans could become "like God." Importantly, the text does not equate the fruit with intelligence or technology. Rather, it warns against the presumption of autonomy—deciding limits and knowledge apart from divine guidance.

Applied to artificial intelligence, this distinction is crucial. Intelligence itself is not a theological problem; Christian thought affirms human creativity as a gift. The danger arises when intelligence—whether human or artificial—becomes detached from conscience, moral responsibility, and humility. When knowledge is pursued as an end in itself, the temptation is to believe that greater calculation or creation makes us self-sufficient. This is not progress but a failure of creaturely humility: the desire to occupy the place of ultimate authority.

Thus, the challenge is not to reject intelligence but to integrate it with responsibility. Theological reflection reminds us that true human flourishing lies not in Babel's self-affirmation but in Jerusalem's communion—where creativity is exercised with reverence, conscience, and dependence upon God.

Technology and Psychology

One has to be careful when deciding whether digital technology is 'good' or 'bad.' The emerging evidence does not support either

technological optimism (“technology is transforming us for the better”) or technological pessimism (“social media and AI are damaging human mental health”). The more interesting conclusion is that the psychological consequences depend substantially on what technology does to a person’s attention, relationships, identity, agency, and meaning-making—and on what the person brings into the interaction. This is a thought that *Magnifica Humanitas* reflects on.

“Screen-time” versus screen engagement. The older public narrative often asks: How many hours are people spending online? Increasingly, that seems too crude in the present context. A 2024 umbrella review concluded that social media presents both risks and opportunities for adolescent mental health, with effects depending on personal characteristics, type of use and platform design. Various systematic reviews published in 2026 (Fabio & Picciotto, 2026; Park, Lee, Huh, & Potenza, 2026; Sarkar, Acharya, & Sarkar, 2026) similarly found that problematic social-media use was more consistently associated with inattention and impulsivity than general or time-based use. However, the authors had emphasised heterogeneity across studies and cautioned that the evidence is correlational, limiting strong claims about causality. So there is an important distinction between technology use and technology use that displaces, fragments or dysregulates something psychologically important. Watching a 20-minute educational video, maintaining a long-distance friendship through messaging, doomscrolling for three hours, participating in a supportive online community, and asking an AI to explain a difficult concept are all “screen time,” but psychologically they are profoundly different experiences.

Technology may compete for attention, but attention is still ours to cultivate. There are legitimate concerns about attention. Algorithmic feeds, notifications, rapid switching and continuous novelty can encourage fragmented engagement. Recent research finds associations between problematic social-media use and inattention-related outcomes, particularly among adolescents. The more interesting psychological inquiry is what happens when we repeatedly practise giving our attention away. Attention is not merely a cognitive resource. It determines, to some extent, what enters consciousness. What we repeatedly attend to becomes part of our experience, our knowledge and potentially our identity. This is where a psychospiritual perspective becomes interesting: if human consciousness is partly shaped by what we repeatedly choose to notice, then digital technologies do not merely

occupy our attention—they participate in shaping the contents of our consciousness. That is a much more sophisticated claim than “phones are bad.”

Identity exploration. Social media has become a space for identity exploration, particularly during adolescence. The literature itself recognises identity exploration and self-expression as both opportunities and sources of risk. The problem is not necessarily that young people construct identities online. Human beings have always constructed identities in relation to other people. The difference is that digital environments can make the process continuous, public, visual, algorithmically reinforced, and increasingly difficult to separate from one’s offline identity. This raises an interesting psychospiritual question of whether we are becoming the person of value or the person who receives the greatest response from others. That question takes us directly into self-worth, authenticity, values and meaning.

Remaining Human

This may offer a more precise way of understanding the central concern of *Magnifica Humanitas*. Rather than simply asking, “What kind of humanity are we becoming?”, the more fundamental question may be: What understanding of the human person should guide the intelligence we create? The question reverses the usual direction of the conversation. Instead of asking whether artificial intelligence will become sufficiently human-like, it asks whether human beings will continue to understand themselves as more than intelligence. Human consciousness involves knowing and valuing, choosing while assuming responsibility, and achieving while asking whether achievement serves a worthwhile purpose. It involves relationships, vulnerability, moral discernment and, for the religious person, openness to transcendence. Steger’s account of meaning is particularly illuminating here when we think about how human life becomes meaningful through connections, interpretations, purposes and a sense of significance. The Christian vision extends this search beyond psychological meaning toward a relationship with God, suggesting that the deepest meaning of human existence cannot be exhausted by what the human mind can know or what human technology can accomplish.

Perhaps the challenge posed by artificial intelligence is ultimately a challenge of human consciousness. As our machines become increasingly capable of imitating aspects of intelligence, we may be compelled to rediscover that intelligence was never the entirety of what

made us human. The task before humanity is therefore not to reject intelligence, whether human or artificial, but to place intelligence within a larger horizon of meaning, conscience, relationship and transcendence. The question is not simply how intelligent we can become. It is whether we can remain wise enough to know what our intelligence is for.

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