Artificial Intelligence & Wisdom

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"This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. [... it] will discourage the use of their own memory within them.

You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise"[1].

Technical dimension vs anthropological dimension

These words about writing, attributed to Socrates (469-399 BC) by Plato, are quite similar to those we hear today about artificial intelligence (AI). This shows that, at the anthropological level, the ethical challenges of communication have been essentially the same throughout the centuries, even though the technologies used have changed and continue to evolve.

We need to distinguish clearly between the technical and anthropological dimensions of communication. Indeed, "the challenges AI poses are technical, but also anthropological, educational, social and political". It raises "questions that transcend the realms of technology and engineering and have to do with the deeper understanding of the meaning of human life, the construction of knowledge, and the capacity of the mind to attain truth"[2].

A qualitative leap: generative AI

So far, there is not a clear and unambiguous definition of AI because it applies to many different realities. It encompasses a variety of sciences, theories, and techniques aimed at imitating or reproducing certain human-like capabilities such as creativity, learning, and planning.

AI has already been among us for a long time in various forms: social media, virtual assistants, electronic payments, search engines, machine translation, speech and facial recognition, robots, drones, autonomous cars, etc.

Recently there has been a qualitative leap with generative AI systems that can "produce syntactically and semantically coherent texts" (ChatGPT, Bing, Bard, YouChat, etc.) and images (Dall-E, Midjourney, Leonardo, Jasper, etc.). This rapid evolution "is radically affecting the world of information and communication, and through it, certain foundations of life in society". Indeed, "it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish computation from thought"[3]. In this new cultural environment, how can we achieve wisdom and "a fully human communication"?

Appearance of wisdom vs true wisdom

AI and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), offer enormous possibilities for good but are incapable, by

themselves, of bringing us to wisdom and authentic communication. In fact, "it is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart" (*WCD* 2016).

In our technological world, we can confuse knowledge with problem solving; quick connection with sure understanding; relationships with simple contacts; passing information with friendship; thinking with a mechanical process; goodness with profit.

Socrates thought that writing could not lead us to wisdom, as it lacks a defined interlocutor who can respond to possible objections. In fact, "information cannot be separated from living relationships, compassion and sharing" (WDC 2024). Leaving aside the relational dimensions, everything becomes a distant object to be known and dominated. Even the uniqueness of the human person is reduced to a set of data.

True wisdom is always linked to mercy,[4] dialogue, and a welcoming openness to diversity. It cannot be equated to an excessively academic rationalism, distant from the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. Therefore, learning becomes a form of loving. Indeed,

"science in its beginnings was due to men who were in love with the world. They perceived the beauty of the stars and the sea, of the winds and the mountains. Because they loved them their thoughts dwelt upon them, and they wished to understand them more intimately than a mere outward contemplation made possible. «The world» said Heraclitus, «is an ever-living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out». Heraclitus and the

other Ionian philosophers, from whom came the first impulse to scientific knowledge, felt the strange beauty of the world almost like a madness in the blood. […] But step by step, as science has developed, the impulse of love which gave it birth has been increasingly thwarted, while the impulse of power, which was at first a mere cam-follower, has gradually usurped command" (B. Russell).

True wisdom (*sapere*, *sapor*) is meant to give "savour" to life, feeling and understanding that everything is connected. It is not just an analytical, rational, and instrumental knowledge but a way of being and living in fraternal reciprocity. It is of little use to know nature, analyze it, and reveal its internal structure, if we do not love it. In this perspective, knowing is synonymous with acknowledging, being open to mystery, growing in wisdom and in the capacity to love.

"It is not many words that real wisdom proves"

AI systems "can help to overcome ignorance and facilitate the exchange of information" (WCD 2024) but are incapable of making sense of data.

The Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus (VII-VI BC) stated that "it is not many words that real wisdom proves" (W.E . Drake). Also Seneca reacted ironically to the many statements that Lucilius kept proposing to him: "Do I need to know all that?"[5].

The continuous flow of enormous amounts of information complicates its elaboration, interpretation, and articulation, making thoughtful assimilation difficult. We can inform without communicating, receive a lot of data without structuring our thinking. A flood of information can create confusion instead of increasing our knowledge; and quite often, the more we talk, the less we are able to communicate.

"All I Know Is That I Know Nothing"

AI may also reinforce in us "a Promethean presumption of self-sufficiency and an obsessive desire to control everything, losing the sense of limit" (WDP 2024, 4). "Know thyself" was the saying inscribed in the Delphic temple. Following it, Socrates used to repeat, "All I Know Is That I Know Nothing". He thus conducted his research in the form of conversations (maieutics). We also need to embrace a more relational paradigm, recognizing and accepting our limits as creatures and the need for collaboration and reciprocity.

Conclusion: "Exciting opportunities and serious risks"

"Do not be afraid of new technologies!" (*RS* 14), declared John Paul II. We need to set aside catastrophic predictions about AI technologies, but we must also try to prevent their misuse (WCD 2024). Instead of erecting barriers, we must discern the best way of inhabiting the anthropologically qualified space that they are creating.

AI presents "exciting opportunities and serious risks" (WDP 2024,1). Pope Francis invites the international community "to work together in order to adopt a binding international treaty that regulates the development and use of artificial intelligence in its many forms", but he recognizes that regulation is not sufficient. We also need values and a good formation in ethics. Indeed, "it is up to us to decide whether we will become fodder for algorithms or will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom" (WDC 2024).

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[1] Plato. *Phaedrus,* n° 275 (William Heinemann Ltd, London, 1925).

[2] Francis, «Message for the 57th World Day of Peace (WDP), 1.01.2024, in Internet: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/docur messaggio-57giornatamondiale-pace2024.html

[3] Francis, «Message for the 58th World Day of Social Communications» (WCD) 24.01.2024. l

[4] "*Misericordia amica est sapientiae*" Bonaventure, «Collationes de septem donis Spiritus Sanctis,» c.9,15 (*Quaracchi* V 502b).

[5] « *Haec sciam? Et quid ignorem?* » Seneca Lucio Anneo, *Ad Lucilium Epistolae Morales*, epist. 88, Strasburgo 1809, 362.

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