



Intelligence as a human life form[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This text aims to counter the anxieties generated by the recent emergence of AI and the criticisms leveled at it, demanding its moralization. It does so by demonstrating that AI is neither new nor is it true intelligence but rather a tool, akin to many others that have long been serving human intelligence and its objectives. In what follows, I offer a broader reflection on technology that aims to contextualize the novelty and singularity attributed to AI within the history of technological developments. My ultimate goal is to relativize the novelty of AI, seeking to alleviate the moral anxieties it currently elicits and encouraging a more normal, optimistic view of it. The first step in understanding AI is indeed to realize that its novelty is only relative, and that AI has many ancestors that, upon closer examination, turn out to be closely related.

Plato's ChatGTP

In what way does intelligence define the particular nature of human life? Let's consider it from a distance. Back in Plato's time, writing, although common, was a specialized skill—it belonged to a caste of scribes, educated and trained individuals. Reading was typically a communal, oral activity. However, a shift occurred when writing began to be taught in the elementary schools of Attica. This change raised concerns, particularly among those who owned schools. Some argued that there was no longer a necessity for 'live' education; mastering the alphabet and having access to books seemed sufficient, making knowledge readily available. It is noteworthy that the primary impact of this technological advancement wasn't on the 'blue-collar workers' (a term that didn't exist at the time) but on the 'white-collar workers,' or more specifically, in this context, the philosophers' chitons.

Plato illustrates this situation through an Egyptian fable recounted by Socrates to Phaedrus.² The myth revolves around Thoth, a demigod, who approaches Pharaoh Thamus with various inventions, including writing. Thoth extols writing as a *pharmakon*—i.e., a remedy—for memory, able to relieve it from the burden of retention: it will suffice to resort to external notes to remember everything we need. While Thamus acknowledges writing as a *pharmakon*, he interprets it in the alternative Greek sense of the term: a poison. He fears that by relying on external

writings, humans will cease to exercise their living memory. Consequently, knowledge itself will be poisoned, as it will be entrusted to texts that, without the guidance of their author, will remain silent or, worse, be susceptible to various misunderstandings.

The act of writing, in this context, is the realm of amateurs, self-taught individuals, the kind of people today we would call anti-vaxxers or conspiracy theorists. (Socrates even questions Phaedrus about entrusting one's health to a doctor solely trained through books, today's equivalent of someone self-diagnosing by browsing the Internet, in his view). Now, are we talking about writing or artificial intelligence? Isn't this the same criticism leveled against ChatGPT? Conversely, what is ChatGPT if not a new addition to the multitude of tools, all rooted in writing, that have shaped human civilization?

Now, one might raise a pertinent objection. "If the parallel with Plato concerns the worry about relying on external tools for memory, dissemination of inaccurate information, and artificial disruption of our innate cognitive functions, then this criticism should also apply to things like Wikipedia or even the Internet in general."

Well, strange as it may seem, according to recent studies, 25 % of individuals believe that AI negatively impacts memory.³ As for the widespread fears surrounding AI, they do bear resemblance to those once directed at Wikipedia and the Internet in general, but this actually bolsters my argument. Indeed, AI currently stands as the forefront of

[☆] This text owes much to the comments of an anonymous reviewer, whom I would like to thank. The abstract (of particular lucidity) as well as the sections in quotation marks, containing objections to which I respond, are adapted from the reviewer's feedback.

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² Plato (1925).

³ BVA Doxa (2024): 28.

technological development within the Internet domain, evoking similar anxieties to those provoked by the new technology of writing in Plato's time: precisely concerns about externalization from the mind, propagation of false knowledge, and artificial interference with our natural cognitive processes.

Providing historical context to this phenomenon, escaping the misleading notion that this is an unparalleled singularity,⁴ is, in my view, crucial. It not only safeguards against potential myths surrounding artificial intelligence but, more importantly, allows us to comprehend the nature and significance of natural intelligence, which remains the genuine catalyst for this transformative journey.

I think we should begin precisely with Plato, who not only presents a paradox (his critique of writing occurs through writing, and without writing, it wouldn't have come down to us) but also posits that external writing is a flawed reproduction of internal writing, the *logos*, the reasoning of the learning soul. This condemnation of artificial intelligence reveals something crucial about natural intelligence. It serves as a starting point to understand a present that appears futuristic, unpredictable, and akin to science fiction, guiding us back to something fundamental, simultaneously ancient and contemporary.

The equipped mind

Indeed, by likening our soul to a book and a writing table, Plato conveys a profound insight into our mind—it is equipped. In other words, it is predominantly formed by artificial intelligence, sourced externally from sayings, practices, and learned skills that are far from innate or internal. After all, in Plato's view, our mind exists in a delicate balance between two external realms: the world of ideas, accessed through knowledge, and the limitless facets of experience that constitute the life of the mind; these facets, once again, resemble writings inscribed in the soul. So, there is a 'natural' state intricately intertwined with the artificial, and an 'internal' aspect derived from external influences.

It's important to highlight that, in this context, artifice serves as the revealer of nature: a tool, such as the writing table, is used to explain the workings of thought by analogy. In other words, technology emerges as a revelation of the natural, not the other way around. This perspective challenges the suggestive assumption that technical prostheses are derived directly from bodily organs, like the camera obscura from the eye or the pincer from the jaw.⁵ While analogies can be drawn between technical apparatuses and bodily organs, this doesn't imply that the latter evolved for a specific function, like tools. In essence, it is the camera obscura that allows us to retrospectively compare it with the eye, and it is the pincer that enables the comparison with the jaw. Tools are created with an explicit external purpose, allowing us to project a kind of external purpose onto organisms and their components, which, in contrast, have only an internal purpose.

In short, when dealing with an organism, whether human or non-human, it's crucial to resist the temptation of finalism. Finalism involves thinking that the organism and its parts are designed for an external function, as happens with mechanisms. To label the mind as a "knowledge machine"⁶ is to overlook the fact that the mind wasn't created for knowledge; rather, knowledge is a secondary outcome of a development that wasn't at all intended for cognition. The mind is no more designed for knowledge than the nose is crafted to hold spectacles. Instead, an organism evolves in a particular direction, influenced by the social and technological context, and the resulting human life form includes the mind and its cognitive skills.

In other words, the mind cannot be classified as a tool. Instead, the human body, with the mind as an integral part of it, turns out to be specifically apt for the creation and development of tools. These tools

are crafted to fulfill external purposes aligned with the needs of the human organism, which, instead, has no purpose beyond itself.⁷ In short, I differentiate the human from the machine by their respective goals, which are internal and free for the former, and externally imposed by the tool's creator or its user for the latter.

Now, this may raise a few pertinent objections. "A naturalistic perspective of humans tends to liken them to tools for gene transmission."⁸ In this view, evolutionary pressures shape human behavior in a similar way to how programs like ChatGPT are set to operate within their designated systems. Similarly, deterministic functionalist views in sociology define individuals by societal norms and functions rather than personal goals. Our intentions, our feelings and what makes up our "soul" can thus be interpreted as a system of rules (staying away from danger, seeking pleasure, or what our society considers good) that regulate our behavior in the same way as ChatGPT is programmed, for example, not to say immoral things. Ultimately, both human and AI behavior can be seen as governed by rule-based systems. Also, both humans and AI gather data, with humans relying on sensory organs and social cognition, while AI utilizes cameras and internet texts. Additionally, both entities utilize tools, as evidenced by ChatGPT's ability to connect with other programs for tasks like drawing or 3D printing. Finally, current AIs are still simplistic software, but future iterations might come to prioritize their own existence, engendering a kind of internal purpose."

All this is true – as humans, we are certainly determined by a large number of external purposes such as those just mentioned. However, this fact does not conflict with us having an internal purpose, too. Strictly speaking, one may even deny free will and still claim that organisms have an internal purpose. This is because the reason why a beaver or a human exists is radically different from the reason why a hammer or ChatGPT exists. The latter were manufactured to meet human needs, the former were born with no purpose other than to live and, later, to die. It is perfectly fair to say that we receive external purposes from the social world: our second nature intervenes on our first nature. The crucial thing is, however, that the first nature always has the final word. And this is precisely what does *not* happen in a machine: in the absence of human intervention, it remains inert. Sure, under human instruction it can do lots of things and even connect to other machines, for example, but it never does so to meet its own needs (as a human would), but only to meet the needs of humans. To conclude, attributing an internal purpose to a machine is possible, but it remains a *simulation* originating from human agency.

The embodied mind

Another aspect that would probably have been of lesser concern to Plato is the idea that, unlike memories written in books, those inscribed in souls are embodied—they are placed within a body, or more precisely, are part of it. This is the fundamental difference between artificial and natural intelligence: the latter is embodied. While Plato viewed this embodiment as a limitation within the context of his general dismissal of the sensible and the individual, for us, it serves as the reason why artificial intelligence can never surpass natural intelligence. Not because the former cannot be infinitely more skilled than the latter, but because only natural intelligence, endowed with a body (which Plato considered the tomb of the soul), can genuinely have a soul—i.e., intentions, fears, expectations, hopes, and feelings. That's the reason why we are the ones asking questions to ChatGPT and not the other way around.

The critical distinction between organism and mechanism lies here. While a mechanism is crafted for sequential movements, such as the on/off succession of a light bulb, the organism follows a singular phase,

⁴ Bostrom (2014) and Kurzweil (2005).

⁵ Florenskij (1969): 161.

⁶ Clark (2023).

⁷ I discussed these topics in Ferraris (2022).

⁸ Dawkins (1976).

starting with birth and concluding inevitably with death.⁹ This explains why an organism exhibits drives, needs, and fears that are entirely absent in a mechanism. Unlike a mechanism, an organism is entwined in a life cycle—a single, linear progression from birth to death. Within this cycle, emotions like anxiety, need, boredom and, with increasing complexity, sentiments such as romantic love or a sense of social distinction, come into existence.

To put it differently, in the case of organisms, as opposed to mechanisms, a dialectic between nature and second nature unfolds. Mechanisms possess a single nature—the purpose for which they were created. In contrast, organisms have a first nature that exists for no purpose other than itself (one lives because one lives, for no other reason), and in the case of the human organism, this first nature is juxtaposed with a second nature—the techno-social world. This second nature can bestow external purposes and aims on the human organism.

What can we learn from this brief Greek-Egyptian-American history? Essentially three things.

Firstly, it's essential to recognize that artificial intelligence is as ancient as natural intelligence and shares a common history and challenges with it. Since the dawn of the species, humans have consistently invented machines, which became progressively more sophisticated over time. Artificial intelligence has existed at least since the invention of writing, marking the beginning of our ongoing negotiation with it, where reflecting on the past becomes the best approach for planning the future.

Secondly, Plato's fable indicates that the uniqueness of natural intelligence, present not only in humans but in all living beings, lies in its embodiment. This distinction is key in defining the essential difference between natural and artificial intelligence. For example, the dystopian scenario of artificial intelligence taking over propelled by a blind will to power is implausible. Machines have no will, fears, or desires, let alone a thirst for power—all of which are characteristics inherent to organisms, from the simplest to the most sophisticated.

Thirdly, the human mind, situated in an organism adept at systematically utilizing technical devices, is an equipped mind. In other words, it is receptive to modes of use that are inherently denied to artificial intelligence. AI is a tool, whereas the human mind has the ability to use tools. It's these extensions of the human mind and body that distinguish humans from non-human animals. That is why humans are the only species to have invented what we now call 'artificial intelligence' (a term that has meant very different things).

A possible objection would be the following: "Ethologists observe that various animals also use tools—chimpanzees fish for termites with sticks, primates use stones to break coconuts, and birds utilize cars to crack nuts dropped on roads. While some tools are abandoned after use, others are passed down through generations, indicating learned techniques rather than mere instinct."¹⁰

Of course, this is true: there is no reason to deny that various animals use tools. However, their use of tools is very different from that of humans. For us, tools such as hides, shelters, weapons, and fire are indispensable for survival. In contrast, animals can easily survive without tools, so the latter serve as a supplement rather than a constitutive element of their form of life.

What is natural intelligence?

Amidst all this, it's often assumed that we understand what natural intelligence is, which is far from obvious. Many misunderstandings stem from this initial opacity. The challenge in comprehending artificial intelligence lies in two main issues. Firstly, there's the inherent vagueness of the term 'intelligence.' Secondly, there's a tendency to anthropomorphize the capabilities of artificial intelligence. This tendency

becomes particularly problematic since, as mentioned earlier, the concept of natural intelligence, especially 'human' intelligence, is far from clear in the first place.

If we stop and think about what intelligence is, we will quickly realize that we are entering uncharted territory. The term 'intelligent' is sometimes equated with 'living,' especially when contemplating the possibility of intelligent life forms on planets other than Earth. It is also used in a minimalistic sense to describe basic performances such as responding to a stimulus, whereby we attribute intelligent behavior to non-human animals. However, the standard for intelligence is fundamentally rooted in the human life form. Therefore, the fact that many non-human animals possess sensory apparatuses that surpass ours in sharpness and performance doesn't necessarily serve as evidence of superior intelligence from this perspective.

Even when we narrow our focus to human intelligence alone, arriving at clear definitions is far from easy. For example, we readily acknowledge someone's above-average intelligence in specific areas like calculations or chess, while recognizing their lack of social intelligence. This reveals that intelligence is a complex and multifaceted reality, described in various ways such as abstract intelligence, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and empathy. None of these terms, however, truly apply to artificial intelligence, which emerges as an anthropomorphized extension of abilities found in machines. In some instances, these skills may resemble human functions, even if no human is capable of replicating the performance of a sat nav or a search engine.

A life form

If we think about it, it becomes apparent that what we term 'intelligence' is fundamentally tied to the *human life form*. In essence, humanism is not a mere cultural movement, like the Renaissance or the Baroque; it constitutes the core of human life as a fundamental dialectic between nature and second nature, where an organism projects purposes and mechanisms beyond itself. These projections then retroreflect back on the organism, shaping its identity and defining what it is.

It is within the framework of this life form that statements like "Tom is more intelligent than Dick" or "Dick is not intelligent" can take on meaning (note that this does not prevent Dick from living quite decently). The same goes for "Harry is a genius," a statement that doesn't conflict with the fact that, while exceptionally skilled in some activity or field of knowledge, Harry may be inept in another (let's say, for example, unable to tie his shoes, a deficiency that in no way detracts from his qualification as a "genius").

The concept of 'artificial intelligence' is inherently vague and has historically adopted a wide array of meanings. I suggest defining 'artificial intelligence' as any form of technical augmentation capable of enhancing and automating the functions of natural intelligence, which in turn must be seen as characteristic of the human life form. The challenge of defining artificial intelligence, therefore, inevitably transforms into the challenge of defining natural intelligence.

What we call 'natural intelligence' is essentially the human life form, which inherently involves the presence of what we term 'intelligence.' Seeking alternative definitions introduces an anthropocentric element into the matter, leading to a tautological definition (human intelligence is the intelligence of humans) with implicit exclusivity (only humans possess such intelligence). This exclusivity can be challenged, especially when referencing automata that can mimic human intelligence without much difficulty.

It's crucial to define natural intelligence narrowly as an expression of the human life form, not due to anthropocentrism, but for the opposite reason. This approach, in fact, helps us avoid providing a definition of 'general intelligence' that would likely replicate the characteristics of the human life form or force us to use the term 'intelligence' in an overly vague sense. For instance, defining 'intelligence' as the behavior of any system capable of acting in an environment, using information and making decisions, presents a picture that is excessively broad. In this

⁹ Ferraris (2018). See also Ferraris (2024) and Ferraris & Saracco (2023).

¹⁰ Lestel (2001).

vague sense, correctly opening a box could be considered intelligent behavior, yet, when attributed to a human agent, this would not be really indicative of intelligence, as even a total idiot could perform such a task.

In other words, the concept of ‘intelligence’ implicitly includes a reference to the human life form and an evaluative component. When we say that someone has not behaved intelligently, we are not necessarily ruling out the possibility that they are intelligent. Similarly, acknowledging that our cat exhibits behavior we deem ‘intelligent’ does not imply that we view the cat as intelligent in the same sense as we might characterize an acquaintance as intelligent or otherwise.

These reflections are meant to highlight the diverse and often contradictory meanings that lie beneath the label ‘intelligence’ (used to refer, in the absence of other specifications, to natural intelligence). This is why, when discussing ‘artificial intelligence,’ we are referring to a very vague and broad field. It’s not surprising that, in the face of such vagueness, there should be widespread fear. Indeed, it might be more accurate to describe the prevailing attitude as ‘panic,’ given that it is a response to the unknown.

To shed some light on the matter, it’s important to acknowledge that artificial intelligence is not a life form, whether human or non-human. Machines are neither alive nor dead, unlike organisms. While it might be somewhat anthropocentric to assert that foxes are intelligent (attributing characteristics unique to the human species to another species), it is problematic to make a similar claim, except metaphorically, about our mobile phones. This is because a mobile phone is not a life form and instead is dedicated to measuring, recording, and calculating aspects of another life form—our own.

Artificial intelligence as a catachresis

We must never forget that what we call ‘intelligence’ in a machine is, at best, a metaphor and *never* an accurate definition. In rhetorical terms, one might describe ‘intelligence’ in the phrase ‘artificial intelligence’ as a catachresis—a term adopted for lack of a better one based on a vague resemblance, similar to expressions like ‘chair leg’ or ‘bottle neck.’ Assuming that when we refer to ‘artificial intelligence,’ we are pointing to something essentially identical, with only minor differences, to ‘natural intelligence’ is akin to believing that the leg of a table is more or less the same as the leg of a person, constituting a gross mistake.

Indeed, it’s true that a human’s leg is somewhat similar to a cat’s paw, but it’s not true that a human’s leg can at all substitute for a table leg. Similarly, when we conceptualize artificial intelligence and its potential by viewing it as an analog of natural intelligence, we commit the same error as someone who believes that a table leg is roughly equivalent to a human leg. With this analogy, we come to realize that when we fear that artificial intelligence might seize power, we humanize it beyond what is justified. In doing so, we attribute intentions to it that are characteristic of organisms, not mechanisms. It’s like seriously worrying that a table leg might start walking on its own.

In the earlier days of twentieth-century debates on artificial intelligence, which focused on building machines replicating our own brains, confusion between the artificial and the natural might have been more understandable. But today, when artificial intelligence primarily involves the collection and management of vast amounts of diverse data based on probabilistic calculations, there is truly no reason for such confusion.

Hence, in artificial intelligence, one should perceive not the mechanical equivalent of a faculty we possess in organic form, but rather an extensive Babel-like library capable of interacting with natural intelligence. This interaction shouldn’t be viewed as that of an alter ego or a rival, but more akin to a tool—highly complex, yet fundamentally no different from an automatic lawn mower. And with a lawnmower, we hardly fear it will seize control, but trust that it simply saves us from the mundane task of cutting the grass in the garden.

Epilogue. Should we moralize technology?

I would like to make one final remark to point out a recurring problem in the relationship between humanism and technology. Artificial intelligence is ubiquitous, and that’s not surprising; what is surprising is the equally ubiquitous call for an *ethics* of artificial intelligence.¹¹ To an extent, this makes sense, because all human actions, including interactions with machines, can be ethically assessed. Still, it raises the question: why are we so sensitive to ethics in association with artificial intelligence? Why, in the face of a complex machine, is the first (and often the last and only) humanistic requirement an appeal to ethics?

The relatively short life of the Internet encapsulates various moralizing tendencies that underwent historical modifications while maintaining a constant theme—the prioritization of ethics over theory and the emphasis on criticism over the assertion and promotion of overall human progress. Roughly two decades ago, the ethical concerns with new technologies were focused on the protection of privacy (machines are spying on us). This issue then evolved, intertwining surveillance with questions of social justice (machines are not only spying but exploiting us as underpaid or free labor).¹² Finally, with the acceleration linked to the advent of generative artificial intelligence (ChatGPT and the like), the main worry became the hypothesis that AI is an uncontrollable force that must be channeled, lest—in short—robots seize power. The consistent thread throughout these phases is the belief that the response of natural intelligence to the hyperbolic development of artificial intelligence is simple: a call for *more ethics*.

While the reasons behind this demand for ethics are understandable, the equivalence between ‘human’ and ‘ethical’ is questionable at best. Being human is required as much to embody the categorical imperative as it is to commit genocide. Underlying the various metamorphoses that technology can undergo, one principle remains true: ethics functions as a restraining force, the enemy of technological innovation and its associated risks. Today, no one feels the need for philosophical or humanistic reflection on the relationship between ethics and cars (or, more precisely, ethical reflection is translated into practice through the rules of the road). However, real problems arise with self-driving cars, a technology far more advanced than the internal combustion engine. This innovation raises questions about driving responsibilities, which were previously unequivocally attributed to the human driver. What traditionally fell within the clear ethical sphere of a human subject becomes a controversial battleground: who is responsible for the potential malfunction of a self-driving car? Is it the human user or the machine (absolving any real responsibility)? Or is it the programmer who wrote the algorithms governing the self-driving car? The proliferation of questions doesn’t necessarily bring us closer to solving the problems; instead, it seems to push us further away, lost in an ocean of possibilities.

It’s noteworthy that what incites fear and prompts the call for ethics as a remedy against the unknown is not so much the technical apparatus itself but its *novelty*. The ethical concerns about artificial intelligence today are akin to those that half a century ago were directed at television (which is now considered perfectly harmless) and, in Plato’s time, were addressed to writing, newly introduced in the elementary schools of Attica. Plato’s response to the fears stemming from the popularization of writing (and the potential competition books could pose to those, like Plato, running a school) was—you guessed it—ethics. Specifically, he emphasized the contrast between the good and virtuous *logos* written in the soul and the outward, derelict, toxic, and deceptive *logos* inscribed on papyrus or parchment. This fundamental attitude has persisted under the various forms taken by the relationship between humanism and new technologies over time.

In the specific case of artificial intelligence, the contrast is drawn

¹¹ Floridi (2023).

¹² Zuboff (2019).

between a natural intelligence considered the epitome of every value and virtue—perfect in nature and corrupted by technology—and artificial intelligence, perceived as perverse and perverting, like writing according to Plato. It is easy to see that the image of natural intelligence is highly idealized, presupposing a perfect humankind and overlooking the all-too-obvious reality that humans bear very little resemblance to their ideal image, with the world being full of fools and scoundrels. Yet, even in the face of this common-sense evidence, the response does not necessarily involve a call for the moralization or education of humans. Instead, the focus shifts towards the search for (rather than the imposition) of ethical constraints on machines.

In short, the proposition is to moralize the machine, a notion that defies both sense and feasibility. Moralizing ChatGPT is not inherently more practical or sensible than moralizing the daggers that killed Caesar. Ethics can indeed be embedded within an algorithm, but this doesn't transform the machine into a moral agent. One cannot moralize AI any more than one can moralize a knife: the rounded tip of a table knife represents the incorporation of ethical principles into an instrument but does not entail a moralization of the knife itself. The project of an ethics of strong artificial intelligence aims to turn machines into effective ethical agents, something that is inherently unattainable. Machines are, by definition, mechanisms and not organisms. And possessing an organism is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition (non-human animals are organisms, but it makes no more sense to speak of 'beaver ethics' than it does to speak of 'mobile phone ethics,' referring to a supposed moral initiative to be placed in the hands of machines) to generate ethical aims and behavior. The call for machine ethics disregards this circumstance and instead conveys the idea that the increasing complexity of mechanisms makes them actual or potential moral agents. Two fundamental misunderstandings underlie this assumption.

The first is the notion that increasing complexity necessitates additional ethics. However, complexity does not alter the fact that even the most sophisticated computers remain automatons—mechanisms. And as mentioned, mechanisms cannot become ethical agents: this condition is reserved for human organisms, which are endowed with goals and intentionality as such, and are systematically connected with technosocial mechanisms enhancing and structuring their inherent intentionality. (Incidentally, it's worth noting that the only area in recent years where the need for ethics—specifically, communication ethics—for humans in correlation with new technologies has arisen is the diatribe on post-truth. In this context, the responsibility of humans as mystifiers takes center stage. However, even in this case, ethics is ultimately applied not to humans but to machines. Machines are considered responsible for desensitizing us to the values of truth, and perhaps even goodness. Therefore, intervention in addressing a human flaw is seen to necessitate the moralization of the machine, possibly through the establishment of fact-checking committees).

The second misunderstanding underlying the call for the moralization of new technologies is the idea, shared by both philosophers and non-philosophers, that thinkers and humanists, in general, are akin to military chaplains parachuted into the world of technology with an almost exclusively moralizing mission. In this view, the humanist is seen as an intellectual placed in society not to contribute knowledge and skills, which are the domain of technicians, but to bring caution and morality. The humanist's task is characterized as that of a puritanical

intellectual—similar to Daniele da Volterra, who censured Michelangelo's Last Judgment—called upon to moralize technology with a supplement of soul and poorly concealed conservatism. Criticizing technology in this framework often leads to criticizing progress itself, as seen in a lineage of humanists from Rousseau to Heidegger, who started by denouncing the dictatorship of technology and its evils but ended up condemning progress as a corruption of humanity. Here, ethics is considered low-cost, minimum-value knowledge offered by the humanist to other humanists—a knowledge within the reach of anyone, as it takes little effort to state, for example, that we need to find alternative values to liberalism. The real challenges arise when it comes to solving problems, not just enunciating them.

Let me attempt to draw a conclusion. The primacy of ethics over technology is not only useless but harmful. It's important to remember that the time and effort spent on the moralization of the Internet and artificial intelligence represent resources and possibilities taken away from other potential positive and productive uses of new technologies. The Web should not be reduced to a space where platforms and technologies generate profits while critical reflection and humanism retreat into the state of a sad and querulous science. This outcome is not inevitable, and the alternative to the constant emphasis on ethical concerns is not moral indifferentism. Instead, it involves promoting affirmative actions that transcend the simple realm of critique. Humanists, moving beyond the confines of ethics and the mere enunciation of good intentions, should propose practical solutions driven by ethics, as no one advocates a malevolent or ethically indifferent use of new technologies. However, the moral imperative should express itself into concrete actions that promote human progress and the pursuit of greater social justice.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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