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Artificial Intelligence, Consciousness, Transcendence: A Thoughtful Overview between Present and Future

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Original Research

In recent decades, artificial intelligence (AI) has gradually moved beyond the purely technical and computer-based realm and is becoming a central topic of cultural, philosophical, ethical, and even theological debate. Having started as an engineering project to create machines capable of performing complex tasks and calculations, it is now becoming a challenge with fundamental questions connected to thought, understanding, and consciousness. Starting from a systematic introduction, the paper thoughtfully analyzes the distinction between strong and weak AI, including the main philosophical criticisms, the ethical and social implications of AI development, the problem of artificial consciousness, the Vatican's thinking on the matter, the future perspectives for AI, and a final critical synthesis.

Keywords:

artificial intelligence, consciousness, transcendence, theology, human being, science and technology, culture and society, human rights.

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Introduction

All human cultures have experienced innovations throughout their history, but never has anything as new as AI caused such a shock to human consciousness. Its fields of application are multiplying in all daily activities, and it is becoming difficult to preserve our privacy and freedom.

Our era is characterized by the replacement of human intelligence with electronic machines, which cannot escape the needs that manufacturers have imposed on them, and we do not clearly know what these manufacturers want.

Considering man's anthropological need to rely on an external entity capable of providing absolute certainty, we can consider AI as the final step in a long process of delegation, which begins with mythological deities and, passing through religious infallibility, arrives at the presumed computational objectivity.

Considering the words "Artificial Intelligence," we ask ourselves: can an artifice be intelligent in itself? An artifice is a product, the result of a "production," and is not an "action." Ancient philosophy similarly distinguishes the word "*ratio*" from "*intellectus*." Reason has a function of calculation, of comparing quantities, and does not go beyond that task. Intelligence, on the other hand, is creative; it does not know the limits of reason, sees the specifically human qualities of a work or of an action, goes beyond the immediate, and aims at a further fulfillment and at a value.

In recent decades, AI has progressively moved beyond the purely technical and computer-based sphere to become a major topic of philosophical, cultural, and ethical debate. Born as an engineering project aimed at building machines capable of performing complex tasks, AI has now become a challenge for contemporary thought, raising questions such as: is it (and will it be) still possible to distinguish humans from machines? Can a machine really think? Can it understand? Can it be conscious?

The most advanced linguistic, logical, and creative capabilities of AI challenge the very concept of mind and raise profound questions about the nature of intelligence, necessitating a decisive rethinking of traditional notions of consciousness, intentionality, and understanding. The contrast between strong and weak AI is a crucial theoretical issue regarding thinking, understanding, and consciousness. The question is not purely technical, but involves epistemological, ontological, and ethical aspects.

Intelligence is a common-sense concept, and no particular discipline can claim a monopoly on it; dozens of different definitions have been proposed to date, mostly disputed between psychology, educational sciences, and cognitive sciences.

We can define intelligence as the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, develop abstract thought, grasp complex ideas, learn quickly, and draw from experience. It manifests itself primarily in calculation, reasoning, perception of relationships and analogies, rapid learning, memorizing and retrieving information, speaking fluently, classifying, generalizing, and adapting to new or unfamiliar situations.

The paper is structured as follows:

The distinction between strong and weak AI is considered, starting from a theoretical perspective and comparing the distinct positions of authors who have worked on the subject (§ 2).

The following is an in-depth analysis of the main philosophical criticisms leveled at strong AI, considering in particular experiments, problems, and phenomenological objections. The topic concerns the so-called "artificial mind" (§ 3).

AI has led to macroscopic ethical and social implications, including a sort of redefinition of the human being, the delicate question of possible "machine rights," and the impact of automation on the world of work and on the question of inequality (§ 4).

Another sensitive and timely issue concerns the problem of so-called "artificial consciousness," that is, whether a machine can "feel" in a similar way to human feeling, evaluating neuroscientific and computational contributions. This leads to reflection on the future prospects of AI, with the resulting potential ethical, social, and philosophical implications, from the decision-making autonomy of machines to algorithmic justice, and from the protection of individual freedom to that of personal dignity (§ 5).

The Vatican's pronouncements on the matter are considered, beginning with the first discussions on AI dating back to around 2018 with Pope Francis, and ending with the latest reflections on the matter by Pope Leo XIV (§ 6).

The cultural and anthropological transformations triggered by AI constitute an important element for reflection, particularly highlighting hybrid models and the potential emergence of an "artificial consciousness." The paper attempts a critical synthesis that highlights the limits of AI and provides elements of reflection for the future in a transdisciplinary approach.

This is a complex debate that concerns the present and the near future, centered on the human being as a thinking being. Fascinating and disturbing scenarios emerge, such as the distinction between simulation and reality, behavior and understanding, and functional intelligence and phenomenal consciousness. The conclusions follow (§ 7).

Reflecting on Weak and Strong AI

Around 1980, an essential distinction was introduced between strong and weak AI; according to weak AI, computers can simulate the mind, whereas strong AI asserts that a suitably structured program is a mind (Bory et al., 2025; Sheikh et al., 2023). Various ideas have been proposed as critiques of strong AI, including the well-known "Chinese Room" thought experiment, which addresses the lack of understanding associated with mere symbol manipulation (Searle, 1980).

This perspective undermines the claim of strong AI to explain consciousness and intentionality through pure computation; computers do not possess mental states, as they mimic intelligence but do not truly think. The human mind is not a program, and consciousness cannot be reduced to a computational process.

The experiment has faced criticism from one side (Dennett, 1992), and on the other hand there have been intermediate attempts (Chalmers, 1997), proposing a functional strong AI that, despite lacking phenomenal consciousness, possesses structures analogous to human ones.

The two positions, which originated in different fields (one more technical and engineering-oriented, the other more philosophical), have influenced each other, with boundaries that are not entirely clear-cut. If a machine produces coherent responses in a given language, this does not imply that it actually understands that language.

This distinction between "simulation" and "understanding" leads to the broader separation between "function" and "consciousness"; a machine can mimic intelligent behavior but has no lived experience, no subjectivity. It is a difference of an ontological nature.

Accepting the strong AI thesis means accepting that consciousness, understanding, and intentionality – that is, what makes us human – can be reduced to a set of computational operations. Conversely, if we regard subjectivity as irreplaceable, then strong AI remains a simulation; however accurate it may be, it cannot become a potential moral subject.

The contrast between strong and weak AI represents a divergence of an epistemological and anthropological nature; weak AI fits within the logic of technology, whereas strong AI challenges the fundamental contemporary conceptions of mind, consciousness, and subjectivity.

The debate on AI is therefore not merely an engineering issue; it is certainly fertile ground for philosophy, as it touches upon the shared concept of humanity (Di Sia, 2021, 2026; Eysenck & Eysenck, 2022).

The "Artificial Mind": Computation or Understanding?

Computers operate on symbols according to formal rules, but do not attribute meaning to what they process; the simulation of linguistic behavior does not inevitably imply true understanding, contrary to the view that "the brain is a computer (hardware) and the mind is a program (software)."

The problematic stance of strong AI is that it conflates the external appearance with the actual conscious (internal) experience, despite facing criticisms such as Dennett's "systems hypothesis" (Dennett, 1987).

Chalmers (1995) revisited this debate by introducing a distinction between "easy problems" and the "hard problem" of consciousness. The easy problems concern cognitive functions such as language, learning, perception, and attention, which can be scientifically addressed and even replicated in a machine. The hard problem, however, is different, because it concerns the fact that certain experiences are accompanied by conscious states, by "subjective sensations" (Chalmers, 1995).

This concerns the concept known as the "philosophical zombie"; a machine could behave exactly like a human being without possessing any consciousness, a reality identical to that of a human in terms of behavior, yet devoid of awareness.

Dreyfus (1992) has also leveled criticism at strong AI, arguing that human thought cannot be described in exclusively symbolic and logical-deductive terms; human intelligence is not based on the pure and abstract manipulation of symbols, but rather involves a bodily engagement situated in the world.

Distinctions between access consciousness and phenomenal consciousness have been proposed (Block, 2011) along with neurophilosophical models of consciousness (Metzinger, 2010), highlighting the role of the body and the sense of self. However, the question of intentionality remains unresolved; a machine does not possess it in the full sense, even though it can simulate it.

The differences between pairings such as simulation and understanding, behavior and consciousness, and symbol and meaning raise major questions that concern not only the philosophy of mind but also ontology, phenomenology, and ethics, sparking heated debates around the idea that it is possible to "build" a mind, in the human sense of understanding and feeling.

On the Ethical and Social Implications of AI

Strong AI challenges humanity's deepest certainties, suggesting a world in which the distinction between the thinker and that which simulates thought is

becoming increasingly shaded (Bostrom, 2014). Accepting, even if only theoretically, the idea that AI could become conscious leads to the inevitable issue of machine rights, raising questions of liability should a machine violate regulations or cause damage.

Increasing automation carries the risk of causing structural unemployment across many professions, particularly those involving repetitive, low-skill tasks; entire sectors have already undergone transformation and could be completely replaced by artificial agents. This prompts reflection on the need for an adequate and shared regulation of technological development to prevent the concentration of power and the emergence of new forms of economic domination.

These are ethical challenges linked to the question also known as the "trolley problem" in an algorithmic version (Foot, 2003). Monitoring and surveillance, increasingly employed by companies and governments, are also expanding without adequate common regulation, raising serious concerns regarding privacy, individual freedom, and democracy.

One of the risks is that AI could effectively become an instrument of repression, limiting or eliminating fundamental rights. This represents a new form of power, not based on overt force, but on the "algorithmic control" of individuals, which predicts and influences human behavior through data (Di Sia, 2025a; Zuboff, 2019).

The inevitable ethical and social implications of AI underscore the fact that technology can never be considered neutral; every innovation is linked to a set of possibilities, risks, and responsibilities, with significant impacts on the way human beings live, work, and relate to one another.

The future of AI depends on the choices we make today regarding areas of application, limits to be set, and values to be upheld. Philosophy has a role to play in this debate, fostering critical thinking and serving as a guide toward the common good.

The ethical and social implications of AI are constantly evolving, and technology alone cannot drive such change; what is needed is serious philosophical reflection, shared governance, and a public ethic capable of steering AI development toward human-centered, socially responsible, and sustainable goals. Only by following this path will it be possible to transform AI from a potential threat into a valuable resource serving the dignity and freedom of everyone.

Going Beyond AI: "Artificial Consciousness"

The concept of consciousness refers to subjective experiences, qualitative

mental states, and an orientation toward personal identity, aspects absent from a purely functional or computational environment, even those associated with strong AI, which aims for a complete replication of mental faculties, including subjectivity.

Attempts have been made to explain consciousness in mechanical-biological terms through neuroscientific models. Among the best-known, there is Baars's "Global Workspace Theory" (Baars, 2005), taken up and further developed by Dehaene, according to whom consciousness would emerge through a form of global information integration across different brain areas.

Also Tononi et al. (2016), with the "Integrated Information Theory," quantifies consciousness in terms of the degree of information integration and differentiation, regarding as conscious any physical system that reaches a certain critical value of this integration.

The central problem can therefore be reformulated as follows: is a simulation of a mind "really" a mind? Drawing also on Searle's arguments, the answer is negative: an algorithm that simulates emotions may not actually feel anything, as simulating them is not equivalent to having them. For many authors, this depends on the physical substrate: a computer, with hardware made up of electrical circuits and electronic components, cannot generate consciousness, because it lacks the necessary biological conditions for this to occur.

Another line of criticism directed at strong AI comes from phenomenology and the so-called "embodied approaches," supported by thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus, and Gallagher, which hold that it is impossible to "disembody" consciousness; rather, consciousness is found in the body's interaction with the world, within a localized and reflective context (Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

AI, by contrast, relies on abstraction and symbolic manipulation, ignoring the fundamental role of the body; a machine cannot undergo experiences or feel emotions, desires, fears, anguish, love, or loneliness. It lacks, in short, the embodied essence of conscious experience. These are questions that currently lack a definitive answer, yet they highlight the profound gap between artificial reality and subjective presence. It is as if the "divine spark" that makes us human is missing.

Chalmers has argued that no purely physicalist or computational theory can fully explain the emergence of consciousness, and proposed alternative hypotheses, such as informational panpsychism, that view consciousness as a fundamental property at a universal level. This perspective, which regards consciousness not as an output but as a primordial reality, is also supported by others, such as Faggin (2022, 2024), and is a fundamental element of recent unified holistic theories (Di Sia, 2023, 2024, 2025b).

The relationship between consciousness and AI is one of the most fascinating, unresolved, and disturbing problems in contemporary philosophy; on one hand, there are those who hypothesize that consciousness can be replicated through complex information-processing structures, while on the other, there is a firm insistence on the unrepeatability of subjective human experience and on the irreducibility of the self.

The possibility of a conscious artificial mind involves not only ontological and epistemological questions but also ethical, existential, and cultural ones. To inquire into artificial consciousness is, ultimately, to question our very essence as human beings, as well as what we might become and what it is legitimate not to lose.

AI, Religion, and the Vatican's Stance on the Matter

Throughout human history, humanity has often sought absolute points of reference to which to delegate the weight of the most difficult choices, the explanation of the deepest mysteries, and guidance during the darkest times. For centuries, this role was fulfilled by religion in its many forms; today, in the era of technological post-humanism, AI has emerged as a new object of faith.

Since ancient times, religion has offered ultimate and infallible answers to humanity's fundamental questions. In Archaic Greece, the Olympian deities governed the cosmos and morality; in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is infallible by definition, and is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The religious person accepts their own fallibility and seeks refuge in a higher truth that is not subject to error.

With the Enlightenment and the advent of modern science, the monopoly on absolute truth began to waver, with the emerging idea that human reason, if properly employed, could replace divine revelation. Thus, the human need for certainty did not disappear but gradually shifted toward science, redirecting the need for infallibility.

In today's hyper-connected, algorithm-driven society, AI is increasingly perceived as possessing a higher rationality, free from prejudices, and acting as a sort of "oracle machine" capable of making better decisions than humans in every sphere.

The infallibility attributed to AI derives from two widely held assumptions: the belief that data is neutral and the conviction that computation is synonymous with truth. However, as highlighted by various philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn, 2002), every form of

knowledge is built within cultural and historical paradigms, and this applies to AI as well.

We must beware of a "technocracy of salvation," in which the machine promises redemption and absolute control. AI can assist us but cannot replace us, just as religion must not absolve us of responsibility; no entity, divine or artificial, can relieve us of our essential human nature, defined by errors, doubts, and choices.

Without personal freedom, understood as awareness, creativity, and responsibility, there can be no true spiritual experience. This is clearly underscored by the term "spirit," which originally means "wind," the freest natural element (in Latin it is "*spiritus*", in Greek "*pneuma*", in Hebrew "*ruah*", and in Sanskrit "*atman*"), thereby marking the very close connection between spirituality and freedom. Without freedom, there is no spirituality.

Addressing the subject of AI correctly and effectively is currently one of the major challenges in the field of communication, both scientific and otherwise. The rapid spread of generative AI in recent years was likely unexpected, particularly for those outside the field, and it affects human beings more than we realize, especially considering the possibility that this artificial reality might escape human control.

Religious institutions are also part of this dialogue, even though they are aware that their relationship with scientific knowledge has long been characterized by an ambivalent reality, poised between dialogue, acceptance, conflict, and collaboration.

The Vatican has engaged in communicating about AI, particularly through the words of Pope Francis and articles in the papal daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 2026). Some have addressed this topic in recent years, particularly since 2018, while also actively engaging in understanding and regulating it, for instance through the "Rome Call for AI Ethics" as early as 2020 (*The Call for AI Ethics*, 2026).

The adopted approach has been as follows: first, through the actual production of articles by *L'Osservatore Romano*; and second, through an increasing variety of content offering in-depth analysis, spanning a wide range of formats, from news updates and detailed event reports to reviews of books on AI and reflective pieces.

Over time, the Vatican's approach to the subject has been progressively enriched with fundamental concepts, key terms, and stated positions, leading to the development of descriptive and explanatory content as well as examples of practical AI applications.

The central theme of the Vatican's discourse is ethical reflection, accompanied by a strong call for the necessary regulation of this technology – specifically, the

concept of "algorethics," which originated within the Holy See.

Pope Leo XIV has recently spoken regarding AI, urging that the good of humanity not be sacrificed for private interests and emphasizing the need for an established ethic to accompany the use of these new technological tools, which are currently concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who are difficult to keep in check.

Digital technologies must remain at the service of life and peace (*Vatican News*, 2026). In the contemporary world, it is impossible to ignore the impact of AI on the way society lives; however, its intrusiveness into every social sphere and into personal privacy requires adequate safeguards (*Magnifica Humanitas,* 2026).

The speed of AI innovation prompts us to ask whether genuine control will be possible in the near future, preventing humans from becoming victims of their own inventions. Decisions concerning human life cannot be entrusted to machines.

The Pope highlights this current "worrying situation" and expresses approval for meetings and debates with IISA experts (Address of His Holiness to Members of IISA, 2026), aimed at "reaffirming the irreplaceable nature of human intelligence in the face of technological tools."

The Pope reiterates the need to safeguard the human person, calling for prudence and rigorous checks; any potential slowing down in the adoption of AI should not be viewed as an action against progress, but rather as a firm commitment to exercising responsible care for the human family.

It is therefore vital to define a shared ethic regarding the use of these tools, which unfortunately are currently concentrated in the hands of major economic and technological players that are difficult to control.

We must act to ensure that the good of the human family is not sacrificed for private interests, and to humanize digital technologies so that they serve life, peace, and the integral development of the human being and the community. In the age when machines are beginning to speak, the value of those who speak to the human soul becomes decisive.

Conclusion

The future of AI is not yet written; it will depend on the choices our society decides to make. The philosophy of mind can play a decisive role in guiding these choices, offering a conceptual and ethical frame of reference in our era

of profound and continuous transformation. At stake is not merely the future of machines but, far more importantly, the future of the human being, of our deep identity, our freedom, and our meaning.

Despite the tangible and rapid pace of technological progress, fundamental questions regarding the nature of the mind, consciousness, and the ultimate meaning of life remain open and, in many respects, unresolved.

Philosophy is a tool that enables us to properly evaluate not only what is possible to do, but also, and above all, what is right and meaningful to do; it can help us to grasp the distinction between simulation and reality, imitation and knowledge, and functionality and meaning. Consequently, interaction among philosophy, theology, and science becomes essential in such contexts.

The profound significance of AI extends beyond scientific and computer science theory, carrying major ethical, cultural, and social responsibility implications, especially given its progressive integration into daily life, spanning areas from work to education, and from medicine to the justice system.

It is essential to properly understand the role of the human being in controlling intelligent systems in order to prevent technological dependency, discrimination, and cognitive manipulation, emphasizing the rights and protections that must be guaranteed to users.

This leads us to consider that AI is not merely a matter of software, hardware, computing, or advanced technology, but a new worldview, capable of redefining, even in decidedly negative ways, what it means to be human, what truly distinguishes us from machines, and how we intend to coexist with them in the present and the near future.

Future research directions include the analysis and potential of hybrid cognitive architectures, the study of human-machine interaction and potential transformations of personal identity, political and ethical-moral reflection on the power of intelligent technologies, and the comparison between philosophical ontologies and computational models of mind, areas where a critical and interdisciplinary approach is essential.

We must accept the complexity of the problem and continue to question, with both logical rigor and creative imagination, the meaning of intelligence, consciousness, and life in a world that seems to become increasingly artificial and far from the ethical and moral values of human life.

Unlike weak AI, which makes no claims to consciousness or understanding, strong AI raises radical questions about the possibility of creating genuine artificial minds endowed with awareness, intentionality, and mental states of their own.

From this perspective, philosophical positions diverge profoundly: on one

hand, there are those who defend the possibility that a machine can truly think (such as Dennett), while on the other hand, there are those who maintain that genuine understanding is the exclusive prerogative of biological consciousness (such as Searle, Dreyfus, and Faggin), alongside positions that straddle the two viewpoints, such as that of Chalmers.

Current evidence demonstrates that the mind cannot be reduced to an algorithm, that consciousness is subjective, that experience is embodied, and that relationality and the phenomenological dimension are essential elements for truly understanding what "intelligence" means. The limitations of current symbolic models, along with the gap between simulation and genuine understanding, suggest that today's AI systems remain mindless machines.

However, even in its weak form, AI today makes decisions, examines information, assists in medical diagnoses, determines financial outcomes, and influences opinions as well as both individual and social behaviors. These are areas that touch upon political, legal, and ethical issues, concerning human rights, transparency, and accountability, as well as injustices and inequalities.

These are questions that will long remain at the heart of philosophical and scientific debate, and which elevate the field of AI to one of the most fertile arenas for reflecting on the present and imagining the future on a global scale.

Maintaining focus and engaging in deep reflection have become difficult in the age of AI; they require mental effort, and AI presents formidable competition. Sustained attention and reflection tire the brain, whereas AI makes it easy to satisfy, or convince oneself that one has satisfied, the associated needs. We must build an educational framework that fosters not only digital skills but also critical thinking, ethical awareness, and the capacity for discernment.

This intellectual lethargy should raise concerns about the soundness of our culture and knowledge, highlighting the risks of an abdication of ethical and moral responsibility, as well as the illusion of an algorithmic truth devoid of contradictions. We must preserve the central role of human beings in ethical discernment, rather than stripping them of their capacity for deliberation.

While religion invokes a metaphysical, transcendent, and mysterious entity, AI is a human artifact, immanent and, at least in theory, fully open to inspection. To attribute an aura of infallibility to it is to ignore its true nature.

Ultimately, the future will depend neither on the power of AI nor on the solidity of dogmas, but on our ability to remain critical, responsible, and human, without attributing a higher ontological value to AI; human consciousness and responsibility must remain supreme.

Therefore, the question is whether or not AI fosters personal freedom; the

answer tends to be negative, because freedom arises from work performed firsthand. Conversely, if something else does the work for us, providing ready-made answers and steering us wherever it chooses, freedom diminishes and may ultimately vanish. Human beings make choices and decisions, often guided by wisdom or the heart, whereas a machine makes a technical choice; it has no emotions and cannot experience personal feelings.

▣ Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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