2024 CAPPF International Conference
Generative Artificial Intelligence and Technocratic paradigm: how to promote the wellbeing of humanity, care for nature and a world of peace.
21st June 2024

Opening Remarks
by Giovanni Marseguerra[1]

I am very pleased on behalf of the Foundation's Scientific Committee to welcome you to our annual International Conference and let me warmly thank all our distinguished guest speakers for accepting to bring their high qualified contribution to our gathering.

This year International Conference has the very ambitious and demanding goal to analyze the many and diversified impacts on our society of the recent advancements of Generative Artificial Intelligence (which, strictly speaking and as clearly indicated by Pope Francis in his recent address to the G7 group, "*is not really generative*", "*it does not develop new analyses or concepts, but repeats those that it finds, giving them an appealing form. Then, the more it finds a repeated notion or hypothesis, the more it considers it legitimate and valid. Rather than being "generative", then, it is instead "reinforcing" in the sense that it rearranges existing content, helping to consolidate it, often without checking whether it contains errors or preconceptions*").

The impacts of these advancements will be considered in our Conference framing technological progress within the dominant and tragically damaging and destructive technocratic paradigm, having in mind that "*Not every increase in power represents progress for humanity*" (Laudate Deum n. 24). At the same time, however, in our reflection, we will try to move beyond this negative paradigm, promoting instead Pope Francis' positive vision of technology where is the human openness to others and to God which ultimately produces our technical capacity so that technology should be considered as "*a sign of our orientation towards the future*".

The integration of AI into science and research has transformed the way knowledge is generated, discoveries are made, and data is analyzed across various disciplines. This revolution, driven by generative AI and machine learning tooLaudato Sì, presents significant opportunities for scientific advancement, innovative research methodologies, and greater productivity. However, it aLaudato Sìo harbors risks, such as the large-scale generation of disinformation and other unethical uses with significant societal consequences. Realizing AI's full potential requires full understanding of its capabilities and constraints, responsible innovation, and a strategic approach to addressing its limitations. Some risks are due to the tool's technical limitations, and others have to do with the (intentional or unintentional) use of the tool. Different institutions have issued guidance on how to use AI, and Generative AI in particular, to seize any opportunities it could bring, to confront its challenges, and to mitigate its risks. The proliferation of guidelines and recommendations, however, has created a complex landscape that makes it difficult to decide which guidelines should be followed in a particular context.

---

[1] *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, Milano*, and *CAPP Foundation* Scientific Committee Coordinator.*

We recognize that we live in a change of era and our time is crossed by several transitions mutually interacting and affecting each other. Environmental transition, economic transition, social transition, demographic transition, digital transition, and now – forcefully - geopolitical transition. Sustainability itself is a highly complex concept made of a number of connected elements to be continuously taken into consideration (Laudato sì has taught us that everything is connected: humankind is connected to the ecosystems in which we live, and social problems such as poverty and technological development are connected to our misuse of the natural environment). But transition to go where? We all know that we would like to live in a more sustainable, more inclusive, less unequal society. Less obsessed by success and by purely material well-being. Richer in humanity and fraternity. But there is a problem: not necessarily we are going to converge to that ideal sustainable society. Sustainability is not guaranteed as these many transitions are neither controlled not naturally oriented towards the society we all would like to see emerging. In this respect, the role of technological progress is going to be crucially important. But again, it is not clear whether its contribution will be positive or negative.

In the last few years, the EU has made strides in setting a comprehensive regulatory framework to curb the power of Big Tech. These rules, if efficiently enforced, might establish a new constitution for the digital age, one that is fair, transparent, and accountable to all. However, significant challenges remain - from the rapid rise of opaque machine learning applications in the workplace and digital surveillance, to the dependence on big tech platforms that abuse their market power and operate at odds with the values of democracy and solidarity **and** questions around fundamental rights and data sovereignty. For example - more to the point of our Conference - Can we be sure that the coming wave of new uses of Artificial Intelligence will benefit citizens and workers? How can we curb the monopoly power of Big Tech firms that turn data of millions of persons into privately controlled AI services? How can long-term public investment and green and digital industrial strategies help align digital transformation with values as solidarity, democracy and social justice?

The underlying issue our reflections today is, of course, the attempt to identify what is distinctive and unique about the human being. Perhaps you know the story of the two monks standing on the bank of a stream and contemplating the rippling water. Suddenly, one of them says thoughtfully, "*I wish I were as happy as that fish in the water!*" The other replies, "How can you be sure that the fish is happy? You are not a fish." The first replies, "*How do you know I can't know? You are not me*". This story, which I found in a recent article in *La Civiltà Cattolica* by the Jesuit Father Ferenc Patsch[2], highlights some of the most important issues in current AI research, i.e. how do we know that today's machines really are "intelligent"? Can a computer be more clever or more creative than its human creator? And who is qualified to decide such questions? New technologies make at our disposal extraordinary and challenging resources which make increasingly complex the

---

[2] Ferenc Patsch, *Conscious Machines? Reflections on so-called 'Artificial Intelligence', in 2404, AN IMPOSSIBLE FRATERNITY? Artificial Intelligence,* 29 March 2024.

old and yet unresolved issue of what is distinctive of human beings. The issue is not whether we are 'for' or 'against' machines and technologies. Even the distinction between natural and artificial processes does not help. What is required, instead, is "*to situate scientific and technological knowledge within a broader horizon of meaning, and thus to avert the hegemony of a technocratic paradigm*" (cf. Laudato Sì, 108).

But what exactly is the technocratic paradigm? It can be considered as a full system based on a number of fundamental pillars, here for the sake of simplicity summarized in five (partially overlapping) building blocks:

FIRST - The lack or the loss of the sense of limit, which generates "*the obsessive desire to control everything*" and the strong belief to be able "*to overcome every limit through technology*" in the "*Promethean presumption of self-sufficiency*".[3]

SECOND - The extreme tendency for specialization, essential element of technological progress, which does not allow to see the larger picture and to appreciate the broader horizon. "*A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics; but this is a difficult habit to acquire today. Nor are there genuine ethical horizons to which one can appeal*" (Laudato Sì, 110);

THIRD - The unstoppable search for profit and personal utility, which leads to accept and even encourage any advance in technology. The search for profit is so frantic that there is no space for considering potentially negative impact on human beings. "*maximizing profits is enough*" (Laudato Sì, 109).

FOURTH - The predominance of technocracy - in our society those who have knowledge and are able to conceive technology possess a disproportionate amount of power. The result is that our lives are immersed and dominated by "*an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy*" (Laudato Sì, 189) and "*every increase in power means "an increase of 'progress' itself*" (Laudato Sì, 105).

FIFTH - The pervasive diffusion of the throwaway culture - what is considered worthless is thrown away because it is no longer capable of producing profit, regardless of its intrinsic value as a creature or human being.

The combination of all these (and in fact many other) elements produces our current and pervasive technocratic and efficiency-oriented mentality where the world (including human beings and material objects) is seen as something formless, completely open to manipulation, the goal being that of extracting everything possible from things while ignoring the reality in front of us.

The Apostolic Exhortation Laudate Deum dedicates a full chapter to the technocratic paradigm. In this document, Pope Francis reaffirms with even greater force the fundamental messages of Laudato Sì, emphasizes the need for a profound revision of our life, of individual aspirations, of business models, of the relationship between science, innovation, economy and society, and summarize his point of view in a very clear way: "..*the greater problem is the ideology*

---

[3] Excerpts from Pope Francis' Message for the 57th World Day of Peace, 1st January 2024.

underlying an obsession: to increase human power beyond anything imaginable, before which nonhuman reality is a mere resource at its disposal. Everything that exists ceases to be a gift for which we should be thankful, esteem and cherish, and instead becomes a slave, prey to any whim of the human mind and its capacities" (Laudate Deum, 22).

The general purpose of our Conference today, within the scientific activities of the Foundation and along a research path that has now lasted at least five years, is to push further on our analysis devoted to build the new model of social life forcefully supported and promoted by Holy Father: "*Some economic rules have proved effective for growth, but not for integral human development. Wealth has increased, but together with inequality, with the result that "new forms of poverty are emerging*" (Fratelli Tutti, 21). The problem is then to understand how economic growth and fair and balanced development can be prompted in the digital age by a more solidaristic behavior so to orient the current digital transformation to generate a more inclusive and equal society. Millions of persons are living today in extreme poverty: In a world characterized by an unprecedented level of material well-being, technological means and financial resources, this is a moral outrage. Poverty is not only an economic issue, but rather a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses a lack of both income and the basic capabilities to live in dignity. Persons living in poverty experience many interrelated and mutually reinforcing deprivations that prevent them from realizing their rights: dangerous work conditions; unsafe housing; lack of nutritious food; unequal access to justice; lack of political power; limited access to health care.

We live in an extraordinary moment of change, full of opportunities. But it is crucial that all these brilliant technologies bring their benefits to everyone and contribute to make the world a less unequal place to live. What is needed is a broader vision where technology is used to resolve people's concrete problems, to alleviate their sufferings. Technology must serve humanity, not the market. Technological products are not neutral. Rather, according to Pope Francis, "*they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups*" (Laudato Sì, 107).

I conclude. Technology is not a synonym for progress. Progress is not just about advancements in science and technology and economic growth. Progress is about the world of humanity and refers to the capacity to build a more inclusive world, where our differences are valued for making us stronger together. Technology, by itself, does not ensure social progress as it does not guarantee social improvement unless it focuses on the progress of the human being. Technological progress needs direction, not just speed. The road ahead is clearly indicated by Pope Francis in his address to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life last February: "*The principal task, then, is an anthropological one: we are challenged to develop a culture that, by integrating the resources of science and technology, is capable of acknowledging and promoting the human being in his or her irreducible specificity*". It is up to us to make the necessary and indispensable conversion to follow these indications. Thank you.