

Dizionario  
di dottrina sociale della Chiesa

# Le cose nuove del XXI secolo



Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore  
Centro di Ateneo per la dottrina sociale della Chiesa  
Pubblicazione periodica online  
<https://www.dizionariodottrinasociale.it>  
Fascicolo 2025, 1 - Gennaio-Marzo



VITA E PENSIERO

# Dizionario di dottrina sociale della Chiesa

## Le cose nuove del XXI secolo

Fascicolo 2025, 1 – Gennaio-Marzo

Pubblicazione trimestrale / Four issues per year

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La rivista ha adottato il sistema di *double-blind review*

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### **2025 Vita e Pensiero. Pubblicazioni dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore**

Largo Agostino Gemelli, 1 - 20123 Milano

Proprietario: Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo di Studi Superiori

Registrazione del Tribunale di Milano del 9 Febbraio 2021, n. 24.

Registered with the Milan Court February 9th, 2021, no. 24.

Pubblicità inferiore al 45%

ISSN (digitale): 2784-8884

[www.vitaepensiero.it](http://www.vitaepensiero.it)

Libri Ebook Riviste - Anteprime Notizie Interviste

Anche su     

# THE NEW GENERATIONS IN THE WORLD OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Anna Maria Tarantola

*AI is influencing and transforming society with both positive and negative impacts. The negative ones are particularly relevant for young people who are great consumers of digital tools but unaware of the risks associated with them due to their unconditional trust in technology. They must be protected by reactivating the capacity for care also through an epochal change in the educational model and a broad training process for teachers and families.*

**Keywords:** *Artificial Intelligence, Young people, Education, Big Tech.*

Versione in italiano (Le nuove generazioni nel mondo dell'intelligenza artificiale) a pagina 65.

We are living through a complex technological revolution that presents completely new characteristics compared to previous revolutions: speed of innovations; pervasiveness; significant and unpredictable impacts on all aspects of human life, relationships, society; intertwining of advantages and risks that make it difficult to fully and deeply evaluate them; enormous power of a few large technological entrepreneurs (*Big Tech*). States and societies seem to be slaves to technological development that, together with the economy, has become the guide of human action, taking on the connotation of an end rather than a tool as it is. Technology and economy are tools to be used wisely to pursue the true goal of humanity, which is the improvement of “...the set of conditions of social life that allow both groups and individual members to reach their fulfillment more fully and more readily” (*Gaudium et spes*, 26, definition of common good recalled by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*, 156).

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Among the most recent developments (big data, machine learning, Edge and Fog computing, Distributed Ledger Technology, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality, Internet of Things, Quantum Computing, Robotics), Artificial Intelligence, especially generative intelligence, has a particular importance, which Pope Francis (*G7 14 June 2024, Borgo Egnazia*) has defined as “*an exciting and fearsome tool*” because on the one hand it is an “*extraordinary product of the creative potential of human beings*” that offers new “*exciting*” opportunities and on the other hand it is a tool that can have negative impacts on the quality of life of human beings, on relationships between people and countries, on harmony between peoples, on international stability and on our common home.

The fundamental question in the face of this fascinating and terrible innovation is whether AI is improving the common good, that is, whether it is improving the availability/accessibility for all of: Education – training, health, peace and security, water, food and energy, work. And above all if the world of AI in its various evolutions is ensuring full respect for the dignity of the person through justice, solidarity and subsidiarity.

[see also: *Ethical and Anthropological Aspects of Artificial Intelligence • Artificial Intelligence, philosophical questions*]

Does AI guarantee all this? It is not an easy question to answer because it requires evaluating the impacts that the AI or AIs determine on people, companies, territories, society as a whole and international relations. In today’s conference we focus on young people but perhaps it is worth recalling what are the advantages and disadvantages of AI that the Magisterium of the Holy Father has widely highlighted in various of his speeches.

AI has undoubted advantages, I remember the increase in productivity and efficiency in many sectors, for example in finance, medicine, agriculture, meteorology; the saving of time; the automation of repetitive tasks. These advantages, however, are obtained only if you know how to use it correctly, if you ask the right questions; the risks of errors are significant. Among other things, it is worth highlighting that it is not certain that AI will increase productivity and GDP if its negative effects are taken into account.

But beyond economic issues, we should consider, without fear and hesitation, the ethical, social and management/control issues connected to the widespread use of AI as repeatedly highlighted by the Holy Father: the emergence of oligopoly situations by big tech that are able

to influence the economy, the lives of people and states; the use of algorithms constructed superficially or incorrectly that lead to discrimination or worse; insufficient or missing protection of privacy; the abuse of new technologies for the performance of illicit activities (money laundering and fraud); widespread phenomena of cyber attacks; the impact on the world of work with the emergence of a high number of workers exposed to the risk of losing their jobs and the related need to responsibly manage the delicate reconversion phases; the responsibilities of managers in the decision-making process supported by or delegated to AI; the production of autonomous weapons; the legal issues connected to the responsibilities of developers; customer relations; the amount of toxic waste and the enormous energy consumption that the development of AI entails just as humanity is facing a delicate energy transition; absent or inadequate regulation. These are just a few examples of the many distortions that need to be managed, and not suffered.

The digital world has a particular effect on the younger generations who are compulsive consumers.

During the conference, the results of the Telefono Azzurro – BVA Doxa research will be presented with a particular focus on the risks of the growing use of digital tools by young people.

These risks are exacerbated by the fact that young people have an unconditional trust in technology which lead them, in a significant percentage, to underestimate possible dangers. Especially adolescents, as some studies have shown, believe they are immune from the consequences of risky behaviors, that they are invulnerable (so-called unjustified optimism) and therefore do not take the necessary precautions. They are great consumers but unaware.

Because of their unconditional trust, they have a high probability, higher than that of adults, of being captured/influenced by a few centers of power that control an enormous mass of unprecedented data and information, profile them according to market logic and modify their perception of reality.

This addiction is already causing a worrying change in habits in young people with the risk that they become unaccustomed to thinking and even to using words (Maffei, 2018). Studies show a worsening of the quality of relationships, anonymity pushes them to do things they would never have done in person; they are guided by likes, they lose their sense of reality, of real life. There is also a worrying increase, especially among the most fragile, of lack or scarcity of sleep, vision damage, muscle pain,

mood swings, misalignment with reality, anxiety, panic attacks and depression.

### *What to do*

The fundamental prerequisite to govern/control risks, is the ability to return to being guided by values, not by power and wealth, reactivating the ability to care, attention to the little ones, care. But this would require a different vision of the world compared to the one that has been established.

Just look at what happened after Trump's nomination. Big tech immediately took advantage of the situation to eliminate "ethical" choices they had made, driven by regulations and public opinion. (Google recently eliminated its rules that prohibited the use of AI for weapons development.)

It is a clear demonstration that the world of the technological revolution is driven solely by the goal of obtaining wealth and power without regard to ethical aspects and risks considered residual and acceptable.

Instead, if we want to "enjoy" the benefits of AI without suffering its dark sides, we must urgently work, at all levels, with unconditional courage to understand and correct, and if necessary slow down, AI when it is detrimental to the well-being of all humanity, without exception.

Among the various actions that can be activated, I will focus on three aspects: Education/Research, Regulation and controls, Involvement of AI producers.

### *The educational world*

In particular, it seems urgent to me to change the educational model to protect young people from the risks of AI. In her beautiful *speech for the inauguration of the academic year 2024/2025*, the Rector, Prof. Elena Beccalli, said something that struck me very positively: "*the Catholic University does not aim to be the best university in the world, but the best university for the world*". This is the way to proceed, using training/education to improve individuals and the world, not to compete as an end in itself.

Already in 1991, Saint John Paul II stated that a great educational and cultural work was necessary and urgent, which included "*the edu-*

*cation of consumers to a responsible use of their power of choice, the formation of a high sense of responsibility in producers and, above all, in professionals of mass communication, as well as the necessary intervention of public authorities” (Centesimus annus, 36). It seems to me that these indications apply well to the digital age.*

AI is changing both the way of acquiring knowledge and skills and the very meaning of education. A great challenge for the educational world that is perhaps late in understanding the changes and in the process of adapting methods and contents to the new context.

For this reason, the introduction of AI in educational processes must be associated with a careful evaluation of how to introduce it and how to accustom young people, from an early age, to the conscious and ethical use of new technologies, including the use of social media (literacy). It is important that this process concerns everyone, reducing the digital divide. It would also be appropriate to return to reasoning about the very meaning of education, the influence that technology has on our way of being, on relationships, on the very understanding of educational models.

Let us remember that education has the ultimate goal of helping young people, even in the new context, to become both an economic person and a creative and relational person and to provide them, in addition to technical-scientific skills, the ability to think critically and cultivate the development of transversal knowledge. An algorithm is not able to promote the growth of the person. I wonder if we are working to avoid the high risk of accepting what the AI “says” as good without reasoning on and evaluating the answers with one’s own head.

AI certainly reduces the time to be spent on data/information research and processing. What will young people do with the time saved? I fear that, if not well guided, they will spend it spending even more time on social media, worsening the negative effects on the quality of their lives that we already observe.

AI has a pervasive and possibly transformative impact on society, which is why the entire training process should be redesigned to give priority to the person, providing young people, along with technical skills, a sense of self, of their own specificity, of their own passions, desires, talents. through the practice of caregiving which can become an innovative and motivating source of social justice that allows every human being to live a rewarding life. Research can make a fundamental contribution.

But all these changes in method, content and meaning require an ur-

gent broad training process for teachers and full awareness, at all levels, of the complexity of the process and the need to care for young people and families who should not be left alone. In this regard, the role of universities in preparing future teachers is fundamental.

### *Regulation and controls*

Along with interventions in the educational world, it is necessary to introduce effective and fair global regulation that reduces risks without stifling innovation. It is appropriate for rules to be global, applicable by all countries, streamlined and flexible; it would also be useful a global authority, and incentives that encourage ethical innovation and prevent negative consequences. No more rules but good rules. The European Union has issued the AI Act based on the risk approach, it is an important step but it is not global, the major AI producers are left out: the USA and China.

Unfortunately, the probabilities of having common rules and a global authority are very low, but that does not prevent us from working toward it for a better world.

### *Engage AI producers, marketers and vendors*

Until recently I thought that starting a constructive dialogue with big tech to push them towards the production and trade of an ethical (algoritic) AI, truly at the service of humanity, was possible. Unfortunately after their recent decisions, taken following Trump's inauguration, it seems difficult, almost impossible to obtain a change. The choices on how to configure and use AI are human and humans are the managers/owners of big tech, the change depends on their objective function which, I observe with suffering, it is only and exclusively the pursuit of maximum profit and power.

Perhaps a push from below by public opinion that decides to use only ethical AI could have an effect, then the right incentives are needed: sanctions, taxes, contributions to the common good.

### *Conclusion*

AI has made the world we live in even more complex and has made it harder to interpret and assess its significant impacts on people's lives.

To “protect the new generations in the AI world” we must change our outlook and be aware that now, more than ever, it is absolutely necessary to exercise respect for human dignity and to live this responsibility in our daily activities in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation because this is the way we can make community life more just and cohesive.

Saint John Paul II affirmed in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987, 38) “*we are all truly responsible for everyone*”.

We must feel and explain this responsibility especially towards young people, which are the most vulnerable. We must not leave them alone in this complex and difficult, fascinating and terrible world and work so that technological progress is a tool at the service of the common good, capable of protecting, not harming, the most fragile, and supporting the natural dignity of every human being.

It is a long and difficult path but it is possible, we can start from education and research, regulation and dialogue with AI developers, but even more important is to activate a strong, unified grassroots movement that give an important signal to big tech and regulators of what we mean by technological development that helps and does not harm humanity.

(\*) Text of the speech delivered on February 10, 2025, at the Telefono Azzurro conference: “The child in the center. Safe Internet for all: Protecting The New Generation in the Digital World”.

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