

# Artificial Intelligence: an Attempt to Understand...

Ioannis Mastrogeorgiou\*

We are living through a seismic period of humanity – a period that some call the “Anthropocene” while others, by taking their cue from the existentialist philosopher Karl Jasper’s phrase, call it the “axial age”<sup>1</sup>.

Speaking as a historian, I would say that technologically we are on the cusp of the 4th and 5th Industrial Revolution, which is not yet fully developed but has already begun. The 4th or 5th Industrial Revolution will not only change what we do, but also who we are<sup>2</sup>. It will affect our identity and all issues related to it: our sense of privacy, our perceptions of property, our consumption habits, the time we spend on work and leisure, and the way we develop our lives, cultivate our skills, meet other people, and build our relationships<sup>3</sup>.

Historically speaking, the technology’s enormous transformative power was quickly become apparent; man began to increasingly rely

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\* Ioannis Mastrogeorgiou is the Special Secretary for Long-Term Planning at the Presidency of the Hellenic Government.

1. See K. Jaspers, *Εἰσαγωγή στὴ Φιλοσοφία*, Greek transl., Introduction, Notes, Chr. Malevitsis, Harmos Publications, Athens 2011; G Koumakis, *Karl Jaspers. Ἄνθρωπος καὶ τεχνική*, Univ. of Ioannina Publications, Ioannina 1993.

2. See our book: I. Mastrogeorgiou, *Τὰ Ἐργαλεῖα τῆς Τέταρτης Βιομηχανικῆς Ἐπανάστασης καὶ πῶς Ἀνα-Διαμορφώνουν τὴ ζωὴ μας. Οἱ μεγάλες τεχνολογικὲς ἀνακαλύψεις τῆς ἐποχῆς τῆς Τέταρτης Βιομηχανικῆς ἐπανάστασης καὶ πῶς θὰ ἐπηρεάσουν κάθε πτυχή τῆς ζωῆς μας*, DIKTIO Network for Reforms in Greece Publications, Athens 2018.

3. Klaus Schwab, «The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond», 14/01/ 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/> [29.9.2023].

on his machines to provide him with solutions for everything<sup>4</sup>. But technology had an even more fascinating property. Technological progress fed scientific discoveries anew –e.g. through more advanced instruments, mechanisms and tools– thus, it was constantly improving and developing itself. This regenerative power of technology caused to man such an excitement that he went from being its manager and conductor to feeling like a little wizard and believing that this time his creation could enable him to become a superhuman or transhuman.

Thus, man puts technology at the center of his life and his world, making it a religion. The deification of technology means, on the one hand, that the contemporary man relies on it to solve any problem, even beyond practical ones, such as the search for happiness or immortality, and, on the other hand, that, by deifying his creation, he can abandon any religion and become independent from any god.

The question that arises here is the following: Are we meditating on our evolution or are we evolving mindlessly?

Now, we have arrived at a key point – historically, evolutionarily, anthropologically, theologically, and psychologically: the relationship between man and technology with the advent, now at an exponential rate of development, of Artificial Intelligence (AI)<sup>5</sup>. AI is changing the paradigm as far the relationship between man and machine is concerned. I used to say that today and for the next several years, we will not have AI but... IA, i.e. not smart technology, but “intelligent assistance”. Many people disagree, talking about AGI, about AAI, etc. I neither disagree nor agree. I am preparing myself –and, especially, I’m shielding myself mentally– for every future development.

Sometimes, AI was passing through evolutionary highways at high speed; some other times, it was passing through rough narrow paths. Today, however, AI is at the core of developments that will overdetermine our lives and man in general. But what man? I will

4. See E. Schatzberg, *Τεχνολογία. Κριτική ιστορία μιᾶς ἔννοιας*, T. Tympas (ed.), transl. Th. Tsakalakis, Crete University Press, Herakleion 2024.

5. St. Russell, *Συμβατή με τὸν ἄνθρωπο; Ἡ Τεχνητὴ Νοημοσύνη καὶ τὸ πρόβλημα τοῦ ἐλέγχου*, transl. N. Apostolopoulos, Travlos Publications, Athens 2021; Fereniki Panagopoulou, *Τεχνητὴ Νοημοσύνη: Ὁ δρόμος πρὸς ἓναν ψηφιακὸ συνταγματισμὸ. Μιὰ ἠθικο-συνταγματικὴ θεώρηση*, Papazisis Publications, Athens 2023.

insist on speaking of the God-like man; the man who, morally dynamic and constantly free moving, aims at his transformation by the power of the presence of God's Word or the grace of the Holy Spirit in him. For this man I speak, and this man interests me spiritually. It is unfair that man should be reduced to a plaything in the hands of Technology. Is this the man for whom the Incarnation has taken place? Was it not, as St. Gregory the Theologian says, to «*ἀγιασθῆναι τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ τὸν ἄνθρωπον*»<sup>6</sup>. This is the reason we believe that, at this point, technological development intersects with the need to reinterpret the Orthodox patristic Word – or rather to re-engage with the Word of the Fathers.

I insist, at the risk of being perceived as obsessive and provocative, by saying that technology is neutral. Tim Cook, the president of Apple, claims that: “technology can do great things, but it doesn't want to do anything”. We are the ones who pull the strings. There is no historically deterministic technology. The same technologies can be used for ambiguous purposes.

By setting aside God in man's consciousness, technology has nowadays become a modern, lifeless totem, which man worships daily; he expects from it to respond to his requests. Devoted to its worship, he turns away from the relationship with a higher, divine power which, as he believes, is no longer useful or necessary to him. Gradually, he ceases to function as a spiritual being, with a visible danger of falling into a state of spiritual nihilism<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, this is very dangerous. But to this danger we could give as an answer the man himself, who with his spirit will lead the developments.

However, in the middle of the 20th century humanity suffered an abrupt reality test, when for the first time it realized the enormous power that man had in his hands. The dropping of the nuclear bomb in 1945 numbed the entire planet, which realized that everything could be destroyed by one wrong choice, at the push of a button. One life form,

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6. Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος ΜΕ'*, *Εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πάσχα*, 22, PG 36, 653.

7. Sotiria Orfanidou, *Ψηλαφώντας τὸν Ἄνθρωπο τοῦ μέλλοντος. Μιὰ ἀναζήτηση ταυτότητας στὴν ἐποχὴ τοῦ ψηφιακοῦ ὑπαρξισμοῦ καὶ τῆς 4ης βιομηχανικῆς ἐπανάστασης*, Diadromi Publications, Athens 2023; Sotiria Orfanidou, «Ἡ θεοποίηση τῆς τεχνολογίας ὡς παλαιοδιαθηκικὸ *déjà vu*», 31 Μαΐου 2023, [https://antifono.gr/theopoiisi-technologias/#\\_ftn1](https://antifono.gr/theopoiisi-technologias/#_ftn1) [19.9.2023].

man, only by the superiority of the mind and the supreme powers of the technical civilization that the mind invented, has finally acquired the ability to annihilate all others (including himself). Techno-religion –the deity he worships–, brings with it not only creative powers but also destructive ones, beginning to look more akin to the unpredictable twelve Olympian gods. The need for control and prudence in the use of technology becomes imperative<sup>8</sup>.

A dominant feature is the absence of the relationship between persons; both the relationship between man and God, and the one among people. Man's hypertrophic relationship with technology is linked to the fall to which his own nature leads, that to be human one must experience relations with others as a fellow human being.

The biggest 21st century stake does not seem to be a technological breakthrough or a spectacular achievement of science, but that man should be able to harness the irrepressible power he has created, guided by reason and responsibility, so as to enjoy the benefits while minimizing its destructive potential. Above all, however, what he must do against every sweeping current is to remain human, keeping his spirituality alive and preserving his humanness<sup>9</sup>.

Man is mostly determined by his needs and less by what he does in order to satisfy them, if he does not leave them completely unsatisfied. I am, for example, human because I have the need to think (even if I use my intellectual capacity for my self-destruction), because I have the need to love (even if I fail to love), because I have the need to create or because I have the need to pray.

I am a human being, because –unlike the most advanced machines– I was made to be horizontally in a gendered relationship with another human being and vertically in a holy spiritual relationship with my creator God. Indeed, man's need for relationships is sustained by the fact that, before anything else, God Himself wished to have man as His privileged partner: first by creating him in His image and then by

8. H. Jonas, *Ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς εὐθύνης. Αναζητώντας μιὰ ἠθικὴ γιὰ τὸν τεχνολογικὸ πολιτισμό*, transl. Ntina Samothraki, Th. Stoufis, Harmos Publications, Athens 2018, pp. 363, 364.

9. F. Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Ἡ ἀνοικτὴ ἱστορία καὶ οἱ ἐχθροὶ τῆς. Ἡ ἄνοδος τοῦ βελούδινου Ὀλοκληρωτισμοῦ*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2020.

recreating him through His Son, Christ.

Machines pose another big challenge to man; one again, they put him before the dilemma he has been facing from the very moment of his creation: Will he be wise enough to become a god in the way of God, or will he prove himself once again a fool, trying to become a god in the way of demons? I'm not afraid of machines, but I am afraid of man disconnecting himself from the God-man Christ.

The crucial issue of the future, which has already dawned on man, is whether he will eventually be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Since in the immediate future it will be difficult for anyone to distinguish from his outward manifestations who is a man and who is a machine, one must be spiritually prepared in order to survive. In the years to come, spirituality will be a necessary condition not only for our salvation but also for our biological survival.

By adopting Old Testament stereotypes, we tend to believe that the end of the world will come by the actions of God. But if our world will end not because God wills it, but because man wills it? From the moment that God respected human's freedom at his fall, why will he not respect human's freedom again, if he wants to destroy himself for the second time?

I am not afraid of machines as long as human builds them wisely and uses them just as wisely. I am not afraid of machines, for they will never become humans. But I am afraid of the people who make them.

I just want to add three phrases to sum up my contribution: critical thinking, theological mind and social context of operation. Let us always remember that AI can potentially do anything in the future; yet there is one thing it will never manage to do: it will never be able to pray.