



**The Irreplaceability of Human
Personhood in the Age of AI**



*A Theological Reflection on
Dignity, Personhood,
and the Limits of Technology*



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We are living in a moment when artificial intelligence has stirred both fascination and fear. Some imagine AI replacing us; others imagine it saving us; still others fear it may one day destroy us. Beneath these anxieties lies a deeper confusion about what it means to be human. When we misunderstand ourselves, we inevitably misunderstand the tools we create. The cultural conversation around AI reveals not a technological crisis, but an anthropological one.

This paper seeks to recover the truth of the human person. By examining personhood, dignity, salvation, and moral agency, we can see clearly why humans are unique and why AI, no matter how powerful, cannot share that uniqueness. Only then can we place AI in its proper context - not as a rival to humanity, but as a tool that depends on the beings who made it.





◆ I. What It Means to Be Human

Before we can understand why AI cannot replace us, we must remember what it means to be human. Thomas Aquinas, drawing from Boethius, defines a person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.”¹ These are philosophical terms, but they reveal something essential. A person is an *individual* - unrepeatable, unique, a “who” rather than a “what.” A person is a *substance* - a being that exists in itself, not as a function or output of another system. And a person has a *rational nature* - not merely intelligence, but the capacity to know truth, to choose the good, and to love. This is the dignity the Catechism affirms when it says that of all visible creatures, only the human person is “able to know and love his Creator” and is “willed for its own sake.”²

AI can mimic intelligence, reflect information, and perform astonishing multi-step tasks, but this is not the same as

knowing. Knowing is an act of the intellect - a power of the soul - and it is from knowing that we can love. We cannot love what we do not know, and knowing is not reducible to processing. Personhood is not about output, capability, or speed. It is about *being*. A person is a being with interiority - a center of self-possession and self-gift. AI may appear to “think,” but its processes are not thoughts; they are computations directed toward a goal. There is no interior life behind them, no self, no possession of its own being. This is why AI cannot be a person. And because it cannot be a person, it cannot replace persons.



◆ II. The Source of Human Dignity

To understand why AI cannot replace us, we must remember our own dignity - a dignity that does not come from our output, efficiency, or performance, but from our creation in the image and likeness of God. The Catechism teaches that the human person is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake” and that we alone are “able to know and love our Creator.”³ Our dignity is not earned. It is given. It is a gift rooted in being created by God and ordered to God.

Because we are endowed with a spiritual soul, with intellect and free will, we are capable of recognizing who God is - and from that recognition flows morality. Morality cannot be grounded in ourselves or in our culture; it must be grounded in Someone outside of us, Someone who is Truth itself. Without this reference point, there is no measure by which we can discern good from evil. But with

it, we understand why the human person is destined for eternal beatitude, why Christ became like us, “a little less than the angels,”⁴ and crowned humanity with glory and honor.

This is the key: dignity is not based on capability or intelligence. It is based on being created by God and made for communion with Him. AI, by contrast, is created by us. It has no spiritual soul, no capacity to know God, no ability to love Him. It possesses no intrinsic dignity - only instrumental value. This is what makes us different from AI. Our worth is inherent. AI's worth is functional. And no matter how powerful AI becomes, it will never cross that boundary.



◆ III. Why AI Cannot Save Us

Some take the fear of AI replacing humans even further, imagining that AI might replace God Himself. In many ways, AI has become the golden calf of our age⁵ - shinier than a statue forged of gold, but no different in essence. The truth is simple: nothing we create can save us. If we could create the thing that would finally redeem us, then we would not need redemption in the first place. History shows this pattern again and again. Every time humanity advances, we hold our breath and wonder whether this will be the breakthrough that finally fixes what is broken in us. But our hope is misdirected. We are looking inside the system for the solution to the system's own wounds.

A broken shower cannot fix itself; it needs someone outside of it, someone greater, to restore it. In the same way, nothing within creation can save creation. God has revealed Himself first through nature and then through

divine revelation as the One who alone is God. He is outside the system because He is the Creator of the system. Only He can save us. Grace is His gift, and grace perfects our nature⁶ - but nature cannot save itself.

This is where AI reaches its limit. AI can assist us, amplify our abilities, and help us address many of the problems within our world. It can imitate us, reflect us, and extend our capabilities. But it cannot redeem us. It cannot transform us. It cannot sanctify us. Salvation is the work of God and the work of grace, and it takes place in the soul - something AI does not possess. AI can operate within the world, but it cannot lift the world beyond itself. Only God can do that.



◆ IV. Can AI Be Evil? Understanding Moral Agency

If AI cannot save us, the next fear that arises is whether it might destroy us. When people fear that AI might destroy us, they are really asking whether AI can be evil - whether it can become an agent that seeks our harm. To answer this, we must define conscience. Aquinas describes conscience as *the act of applying knowledge to action*.⁷ But this simple definition rests on deeper foundations. To apply knowledge to action requires far more than information. It requires an **intellect** capable of understanding truth, a **will** capable of choosing the good, **moral knowledge** to recognize good and evil, **interiority** to reflect on one's own actions, and **responsibility** for the choices one makes.

Intellect is not the same as knowledge. Knowledge is content - information, patterns, propositions. Intellect is a

power of the soul,⁸ the faculty by which a person grasps meaning, perceives truth, forms concepts, judges reality, and knows themselves. Knowledge can be stored or processed. Intellect can understand. AI has knowledge in the sense of data and patterns, but it does not have intellect. It does not understand what it outputs. It does not grasp meaning. It does not know that it knows.

Because conscience is an *act of the intellect and will*, AI cannot possess a conscience. It has no interior life from which to evaluate its own actions. It cannot choose the good. It cannot recognize evil. It cannot take responsibility. AI produces outputs, not choices. It draws conclusions from patterns, not from moral insight. It can be given consequence models, but these are merely statistics. It can be constrained by policies and boundaries, but these are external to it - imposed on the system, not arising from within. AI cannot evaluate these boundaries, much less choose them.

Emotions are also part of conscience, though not in the way our culture imagines. Aquinas teaches that the passions are movements of the heart⁹ that alert us to the moral landscape - inclining us toward the good or warning us of evil. They are not conscience itself, but they are the moral data that help the intellect recognize truth and help the will choose the good. Fear warns us. Anger signals injustice. Compassion moves us toward mercy. Joy confirms the good. These interior movements belong to embodied persons with souls. AI has none of this. It does not feel fear or anger or compassion. It does not experience guilt or remorse. It cannot be moved toward the good or tempted toward evil. It can simulate emotional language, but simulation is not experience.

For this reason, AI cannot be evil. Only persons can choose evil, because only persons have intellect, will, conscience, and responsibility. AI can be dangerous, but danger is not the same as moral agency. Evil requires a soul. AI has none.



◆ V. Conclusion

Once we understand that AI lacks personhood, dignity, salvation, and moral agency, the cultural fear surrounding it comes into clearer focus. This cultural fear surrounding AI is not something to panic over, but something to preach into. Fear reveals the places where our culture has forgotten who we are, and it becomes an opportunity to remind the world of the truth of the human person. Across personhood, dignity, salvation, and moral agency, one truth becomes clear: humans are unique because we are persons with souls, interiority, and responsibility. AI is powerful, but it is not a person. It cannot replace us because it cannot be us.

If we misunderstand what AI is, we risk misunderstanding what we are. But if we recover the truth of the human person - created in the image of God,¹⁰ endowed with intellect and will, capable of love, responsible for our

actions, and destined for eternal communion - then AI finds its proper place. It becomes a tool, not a threat; an aid, not a savior; a creation, not a creator. And in this moment of cultural confusion, we have the chance to reorient our hope toward Christ, the only One who saves. AI may reshape our world, but it cannot redefine our humanity. Only God can do that, and He has already spoken the truth about who we are.



◆ Notes

1. Boethius, *Liber de Persona et Duabus Naturis*, ch. 3; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 1, co.
2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 356–357; cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), nos. 12, 24.
3. CCC, nos. 356–357; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24, §3.
4. Psalm 8:5 (NAB); cf. Hebrews 2:7.
5. Cf. Exodus 32:1–6.
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2: "*gratia non tollat naturam, sed perficiat.*"
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, a. 13, co.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 79, a. 1, co.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 22–48 (Treatise on the Passions).
10. Genesis 1:26–27; cf. CCC, nos. 355–358.



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