

Educatio Vitae: Person-centered ethics education in the age of AI

Sandra K. Alexander¹

Since the 1963 encyclical letter *Pacem In Terris* by Pope St. John XXIII, numerous encyclicals have begun not just with warm benedictions to the faithful but also with the greetings, ‘to all people of good will.’ The importance of these words – good and will – is worth reflecting on for students of ethics, as these words go to the heart of what they are asked to consider and define: what is the good, what is the will, and what makes a good will ‘good’? Over the last four decades, other authors of these encyclicals have increasingly asked all people of good will to consider the role of technology in society, the benefits and threats various technologies pose, and the overall role of technology in human flourishing and development.

For students of ethics in the age of artificial intelligence, these considerations take on an added urgency. For example, the disruptions brought to the world of work by the implementation of intelligent, learning systems are rightly ‘hot topics’ in ethics classes today. Although many fears about the dangers of AI are overblown (the total replacement of human workers by machines comes to mind), students are still compelled to consider numerous implications of AI for human labor. The relationship between AI and work, where work is understood as an expression of human dignity and purpose, is worthy of sustained consideration by students today. Likewise, at a time when AI is expanding the reach of healthcare for those in need around the world, some concerns linger. AI research and development still remain in the hands of a relative few and this raises questions about the disproportionate nature of access to and the applications of this technology. Lastly, as the age of artificial intelligence is also, as Pope Francis describes it, one of technological ‘*rapidification*’,² it is worth considering the contribution, if any, of AI to the ‘degradation’ of our ‘common home’ as well as to the degradation of human bonds.³ Such are just two of the issues facing students of ethics today.

Ethics education in the age of AI: considering the goods of dignity and community

So, to return to that appeal first made in the *inscriptio* of *Pacem In Terris* but now viewed in the context of our present situation, we might ask: what should ‘all people of good will’ reflect on in the age of AI? More so for the student of ethics, how should we define ‘the good’ in the age of artificial intelligence? Set within a consistent narrative addressing the fate of humanity and all creation, the views set forth in various encyclicals by Popes St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis suggest compelling answers to these questions.

I would now like to turn my focus to a few of their observations on the impact of technology on the world of work and on social bonds. Ultimately, for those teaching ethics, their observations offer us a clear approach to ethics education in the age of AI, an approach where the preeminent concerns are with human dignity and community. It is a person-centered education that can be described as *educatio vitae*.

¹ Assistant Professor of Humanities, American University in Dubai (United Arab Emirates)

² Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* (2015), Chapter 1 (proper reference needed)

³ Ibid.

Let us begin with the comments of Pope St. John Paul II on the impact of emerging technologies on human labor, those found in his encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* of 1981. It is ‘through work’, he begins, that ‘man must earn his daily bread’.⁴ He continues that, ‘from the beginning... he [man] is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures [...]. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity’.⁵ It is for this reason, he cautions us, that the issue of human labor is ‘a perennial and fundamental one, one that is always relevant and constantly demands renewed attention and decisive witness’, for it is from work that a person’s life claims a ‘specific dignity’.⁶ The particular technological threats to human labor and dignity mentioned by Pope St. John Paul II may appear somewhat outdated to us in the twenty-first century, but it is striking how his concerns over the rise of automation prefigure our concerns today over the impact of autonomous and semi-autonomous systems on skilled workers.⁷ The introduction of automation in various industries at the time of this encyclical, which the Pope says may ‘mean unemployment [...] or the need for retraining’,⁸ nonetheless confronts the fact that work is a process which helps man ‘realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason on his very humanity.’⁹ The confrontation between employment and autonomous or semi-autonomous systems, and its particular implications for the dignity that persons derive from work, are as significant today as they were in 1981.

While *Laborem Exercens* focuses in part on concerns over human dignity in the context of work, in *Laudato Si’* Pope Francis cautions us about the loss of human dignity and freedom in our era of technological ‘rapidification’. Although much of this letter addresses the issue climate change and other threats to our ‘common home’, the Pope also addresses the impact of unnaturally rapid technological development on human bonds and community. As he warns: ‘the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution’, and ‘(t)he goals of this rapid and constant change are not necessarily geared to the common good or to integral or sustainable human development. Change is something desirable, yet it becomes a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity.’¹⁰ Likewise, ‘(o)ur immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. [...] It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us.’¹¹ This disconnection between technological development and conscience might be manifest, for example, in the proposed deployment of semi-autonomous robots or ‘bots’ in caring for the elderly and other persons in need of special assistance. As David O’Hara notes, through the use of such machines ‘(m)aybe our intention is to distance ourselves from the difficult work of care. Our machines might offer one kind of care, while being the physical expression of our lack of interest in those who need the care.’¹²

⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (1981), 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, (proper reference needed; op cit? loc sit?)

¹¹ Ibid. (proper reference needed)

¹² David O’Hara, ‘How Robot Priests Will Change Human Spirituality,’ *Medium*, January 3, 2020 (proper reference needed)

The essential role of ethics education in the age of AI

For students with the talent and ambition to design such machines and systems - machines that will play a yet unrealized role in our ‘caring’ for one another or disrupt and displace the human workforce - these are pressing concerns. For ethics educators, the age of AI and other rapidly developing technologies faces us with a somewhat different, but no less significant concern, one that could potentially undermine our success in addressing these issues: the role of ethics study *in education*.

As mentioned earlier, ethics courses typically ask students to consider what defines ‘the good’ and ‘the good will’, but the study of ethics also confronts students with questions concerning truth. It is on the role of truth in human development that Pope Benedict XVI focuses much of his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Here, the Pope Emeritus expands the Church’s narrative on human dignity, now connecting it with elements essential to integral human development: namely charity, truth, ‘justice and the common good.’¹³ On the subject of truth, he cautions that without truth ‘social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation’.¹⁴ This leads me to ask, what role does asking questions about truth play in the lives of students in the age of AI? The answer is, as it was in the early days of the first universities in the middle ages, it plays an essential if not the most important role in a person’s education.

Yet, the study of truth, ethics, moral philosophy, and theology is under threat in the age of AI, as is the student-centered, person-centered approach to inquiry it necessitates. We might say this treat is the result of the techno-scientific demands being put on university curricula to allow students to engage in more complex, technical training at the expense of studies in the humanities.¹⁵ But it is not ‘educational romanticism’¹⁶ to want to return to a kind of education where ethics is at the foundation. It is woven into the very fabric of education. From St. Augustine, through Clement of Alexandria, to St. Thomas Aquinas, there is agreement on the centrality of theology and moral philosophy in education. All of whom understood that, ‘if knowledge is not planted in the seedbed of wisdom, it would either never take root, or – far worse – grow into something dangerous. It is from ‘Alexandria [that] we learn that ethics [is not] a sub-discipline of the educational curriculum’, even in our technological age, but is ‘in a way, its entirety.’¹⁷

In conclusion: a call to work toward the goods of dignity, community and person-centered ‘educatio vitae’ in the age of AI

[Brief closing comments still being prepared, but I will return to the call ‘to all people of good will’ – in the context of this workshop, students, educators, members of industry, and others – to pursue ‘the good’ in the age of AI and support the vital role of ethics education]

¹³ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ Cf. current events at Saint Louis University (USA), a Jesuit institution, and the removal of ethics from its core curriculum

¹⁶ Matthew J. Milliner, ‘Medieval Wisdom for Modern Universities’, *Public Discourse*, April 6, 2011 (full reference needed)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3