

THE ALGORITHM HAS NO SOUL: THEOLOGICAL ETHICS, ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI), THE ECLIPSE OF THE HUMAN PERSON

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Abstract

The rapid deployment of artificial intelligence across public institutions in developing nations has generated a largely unexamined theological and philosophical crisis: the systematic displacement of the human person endowed with soul, conscience, and relational dignity by algorithmic systems incapable of interiority, empathy, or moral judgment. Existing scholarship engages artificial intelligence primarily through technical and policy lenses, neglecting the profound anthropological rupture that such deployment represents in societies whose self-understanding is constitutively theological and communitarian. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that the uncritical adoption of AI in developing nations constitutes an eclipse of the human person, demanding urgent theological response. The study aims to expose the anthropological assumptions embedded in AI systems, evaluate their incompatibility with Christian and African understandings of personhood, and construct a soul-centred normative framework for AI governance oriented toward the common good. Employing a three-pronged methodology of philosophical anthropology (Aquinas, Maritain, and Wojtyła), Catholic Social Teaching hermeneutics, and African theological philosophy (Ubuntu and Bantu thought) the paper identifies four ethical challenges and proposes four normative principles in response. The paper concludes that confronting the eclipse of the human person by artificial intelligence is a prophetic obligation rooted in the deepest commitments of both Christian theology and

African communitarian ethics.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Human Person, Imago Dei, Common Good, Catholic Social Teaching, Ubuntu.*

1. Introduction

In 1950, Alan Turing proposed what he called the 'imitation game,' a test to determine whether a machine could be distinguished from a human through conversation alone (Turing, 1950). Seven decades later, machines do not merely simulate thought; they govern. They determine who receives a welfare payment, who qualifies for a loan, whose medical symptoms warrant attention, and whose child is admitted to school. In developing nations across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, AI has become an increasingly normalised feature of public life – one that is invisible, unelected, and largely unaccountable.

The question that haunts this development is not Turing's. It is this: Can a machine be just? Can a system of weighted mathematical functions honour the irreducible dignity of a human soul? This paper argues unequivocally no, and contends that the consequences of proceeding otherwise are not merely technical but theological. When a state delegates to an algorithm the governance of human lives, it treats the human person – whom Christian theology confesses as made in the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*) – as a data point, a risk score, an input variable.

The paper's central argument is that artificial intelligence, as currently conceived and deployed in developing nations, constitutes an eclipse of the human person: a systematic obscuring of the interiority, conscience, relational dignity, and communal embeddedness that both Christian theology and African communitarian philosophy identify as the irreducible ground of what it means to be human. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 defines the key terms; Section 3 reviews the relevant literature; Section 4 outlines the methodology; Section 5 develops the philosophical anthropology; Section 6 analyses AI's four modes of eclipse; Section 7 brings African theological philosophy into dialogue with that analysis; Section 8 establishes the theological imperative through Catholic Social Teaching; Section 9 proposes four normative principles; and Section 10 concludes.

2. Definition Of Terms

Algorithm

1. An algorithm is a finite, ordered sequence of well-defined computational steps or logical instructions designed to process input data and produce a desired output or solve a specified problem. Algorithms form the foundational building blocks of computational

systems, governing processes ranging from data sorting and pattern recognition to complex decision-making pipelines (Cormen et al., 2009).

Theological Ethics

2. Theological ethics, also referred to as moral theology, is a systematic and critical discipline that examines human moral conduct, virtues, and obligations through the normative framework of religious doctrine, divine revelation, and sacred scripture

Artificial Intelligence

3. Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the design and development of computational systems capable of performing cognitive tasks historically associated with human intelligence, including but not limited to logical reasoning, natural language processing, pattern recognition, knowledge representation, and adaptive learning

3. Literature Review

Scholarship on artificial intelligence and society has expanded rapidly but unevenly. The dominant streams—computer science, policy analysis, and economic modelling—engage AI primarily as a technical and governance challenge, focusing on fairness metrics, algorithmic accountability, and regulatory design (Pasquale, 2015; Zuboff, 2019). While valuable, this literature operates largely within a secular liberal framework that treats the human person as an autonomous rights-bearer rather than a being constituted by spiritual, relational, and communal depths. The theological and philosophical dimensions of AI governance remain, by comparison, underdeveloped.

Within theology and religious ethics, a growing body of work has begun to engage AI, though it remains predominantly Western and often insufficiently grounded in the specific conditions of the Global South. Scholars such as Herzfeld (2002) and Waters (2016) have addressed AI and theological anthropology, but primarily within North Atlantic contexts. The intersection of AI ethics with Catholic Social Teaching has received increasing attention since Pope Francis's engagement with the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'*, yet dedicated studies applying these frameworks to developing nations are sparse (Francis, 2015).

The literature on digital colonialism represents a critical complement to this theological strand. Kwet (2019) demonstrates that AI deployment in the Global South replicates colonial structures of epistemic domination and economic extraction, while Couldry and Mejias (2019) develop the concept of data colonialism to describe how the commodification of human life through data surveillance

extends prior colonial logics into the digital age. Mohamed et al. (2020) advance a decolonial AI framework, arguing that mainstream AI research encodes power asymmetries that systematically disadvantage postcolonial societies. These analyses, however, rarely engage with the theological traditions of the communities they seek to defend.

The African philosophical tradition offers a distinctive and underutilised resource for AI ethics. Metz (2011) has developed Ubuntu as a formal moral theory relevant to human rights discourse, and Bujo (1998) has integrated Ubuntu into a comprehensive African Christian ethics. Tempels (1945/1959) foundational account of Bantu ontology, though contested in some quarters, remains central to debates about African personhood and relationality. Birhane (2021) provides a recent and rigorous bridge between African relational philosophy and contemporary algorithmic justice scholarship. Yet these resources remain largely siloed from the theological AI ethics literature, and neither stream has been systematically applied to the governance of AI in developing nations. This paper addresses that lacuna by bringing them into constructive dialogue.

4. Methodology

This study employs a systematic conceptual research design, integrating three mutually reinforcing methodological strands: philosophical anthropology, theological hermeneutics, and African theological philosophy. Conceptual methodology is appropriate when the objective is to synthesise, analyse, and theorise from existing intellectual traditions rather than to generate new empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020). The goal here is not hypothesis-testing but normative framework construction – the development of principled criteria for evaluating and reforming AI governance in developing nations.

The first methodological strand draws on the philosophical anthropology of the Catholic intellectual tradition, specifically the accounts of the human person developed by Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain, and Karol Wojtyła. These thinkers are selected not merely for their canonical status within Catholic thought but for the rigour and specificity of their accounts of the soul, conscience, and moral subjectivity – precisely the dimensions of personhood most directly threatened by algorithmic governance.

The second strand employs Catholic Social Teaching hermeneutics, reading key magisterial texts, *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council (Catholic Bishops, 1965), *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Paul, 1987), and *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius, 1931) as normative frameworks for evaluating social institutions and technological systems. This hermeneutical approach treats these documents not as proof-texts but as developed intellectual traditions that can be applied constructively to new contexts, including AI governance.

The third strand draws on African theological philosophy, specifically the Ubuntu ethics of the southern and central African tradition as developed by Metz (2011) and Bujo (1998), and the Bantu ontology documented by Tempels (1945/1959). These frameworks are engaged as intellectually serious resources in their own right, not as supplementary illustrations of points already established within the Western tradition. Sources were selected for methodological rigour, contextual relevance, and recency, with priority given to peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2010 and 2024, supplemented by foundational theoretical texts where appropriate. The analysis proceeds thematically, identifying convergences and productive tensions between these three traditions in their application to AI governance.

5. What Is A Person? Philosophical and Theological Anthropology

5.1 Thomas Aquinas: The Soul as Form of the Body

For Aquinas, the human being is a composite of body and soul – not a soul trapped in a body as Platonic dualism would have it, nor a merely material organism as modern physicalism contends, but a substantial unity in which the rational soul is the form of the body (Aquinas, 1265-1274/1948, Ia, q.76, a.1). The soul is not a ghost in a machine; it is the organising principle that makes a human body a human body, and a human act a human act. The intellect apprehends universal truths – not merely particular sensory data, but the intelligible forms of things – participating in a mode of knowing that is immaterial and irreducible to any computational process (Ia, q.79). The will is ordered toward the good apprehended by the intellect, and it is in the free exercise of will oriented toward the good that the human person achieves the dignity that distinguishes human from animal and, decisively, human from machine.

An AI system, however sophisticated, operates entirely within the order of efficient causality: the mechanical processing of inputs according to learned patterns. It apprehends no universal; it processes tokens, not truths. It has no will, because it is directed toward no good; it optimises functions. And it has no soul, because it has no form that organises a living body toward its proper end. The algorithm has no soul and this is not a poetic metaphor but a precise philosophical claim with far-reaching consequences for governance and justice. When a welfare algorithm renders a decision, it is not an act of prudence; it is a mechanical operation. When that operation affects a human life, something morally essential has been lost: the encounter between two persons, one of whom exercises conscience on behalf of the other.

5.2 Maritain and Wojtyla: Person, Conscience, and Moral Subjectivity

Maritain (1936/1973) distinguished sharply between the individual – the human being considered as part of a material collective – and the person, a spiritual whole and centre of freedom, dignity, and moral responsibility that transcends every

collective and can never be reduced to a means for collective ends. AI governance operates at the level of the individual: the data subject, the user profile, the statistical cluster. It aggregates, classifies, and predicts on the basis of population-level patterns. It cannot encounter the person, because the person in Maritain's sense is irreducible to the data that represents them. The welfare recipient denied benefits by an algorithm is not encountered as a person – a unique spiritual centre with a specific history, a specific suffering, and a specific dignity – but processed as an individual: a set of input variables whose combination falls on the wrong side of a decision boundary.

Wojtyła (1969/1979) grounds this analysis in the first-person experience of moral action. The defining characteristic of the human person is the capacity for self-determination: the experience of acting from within, of being the author of one's own acts, of integrating action with conscience and moral responsibility. It is in the consciously chosen, morally responsible act that the person is most fully revealed and most fully actualised. When algorithmic systems supplant human judgment in governance, the person who receives that decision has not been encountered by a subject capable of moral responsibility. They have been processed by a system incapable of conscience, incapable of recognising their face, and incapable of being moved by their suffering. The moral relationship between an accountable decision-maker and a dignified person has been severed. What remains is efficient administration without moral subjectivity: governance without a soul.

6. The Eclipse: How AI Reduces, Replaces, And Ruptures The Human Person

5.1 The Soulless Arbiter

Across developing nations, AI systems are making or directly informing decisions about access to healthcare, education, credit, welfare, and legal status decisions requiring not merely accurate calculation but moral wisdom, conscience, and compassion (Pasquale, 2015). Aquinas's *prudentia* – the capacity to discern the right course of action in particular circumstances – cannot be algorithmised. It integrates universal principles with the irreducible particularity of a concrete situation, mediated by a conscience formed through experience and relationship (Aquinas, *Ila-IIae*, q.47). When AI substitutes for human prudential judgment, the governed are deprived not merely of accuracy but of wisdom and, with it, the possibility of mercy.

6.2 Anthropological Substitution and Communal Rupture

Anthropological substitution occurs when the Christian and African understanding of the person – spiritual, relational, and morally transcendent – is silently replaced by the reductive anthropology of AI systems, in which the person is constituted by their data. The data subject of AI governance – defined by digital footprint, biometric

identifiers, and transaction records is a profoundly impoverished image of the human person (Zuboff, 2019): one without interiority, conscience, or the capacity for moral growth. This is, in theological terms, an idol. AI governance also systematically erodes the communal structures through which persons are constituted and held accountable. It replaces the community health worker, embedded in local relationships of trust and care, with a diagnostic algorithm; the teacher who knows a student's history with an adaptive platform that knows only test scores; and the local administrator held to account by their community with an opaque system whose decisions cannot be appealed to a human face (Bujo, 1998).

6.3 The Colonial Resurrection

The AI systems deployed in developing nations are overwhelmingly designed, owned, and controlled by corporations headquartered in the global North (Coudry & Mejias, 2019). They encode the cultural assumptions and socioeconomic models of their creators and impose them with the authority of mathematical objectivity on communities whose lives they cannot adequately see. This is what Kwet (2019) calls digital colonialism, and what Mohamed et al. (2020) analyse through decolonial AI theory: a structural relationship of power in which the knowledge and social life of developing nations is extracted as data, processed by foreign systems, and returned as governance. The theological tradition has a name for systems that claim divine-like authority while serving the powerful at the expense of the poor: idols.

7. African Theological Philosophy: Ubuntu, Bantu Ontology, And Relational Personhood

Tempels (1945/1959) argued that Bantu ontology fundamentally differs from Western philosophical categories. Where Western ontology privileges static being substance, essence, and thing Bantu ontology privileges dynamic vital force: reality is constituted not by things that exist but by forces that live, grow, and relate. The human person is not a substance that happens to be in relation; the person is a node of vital force whose strength and dignity are constituted by the quality of their relationships with God, the ancestors, the community, and the cosmos. This ontological framework has radical implications for AI governance. An AI system, in Bantu ontological terms, is not merely a morally neutral tool; it is a force and a potentially diminishing one. When algorithmic governance displaces the relational networks through which vital force flows and is sustained, it weakens the ontological fabric of community life itself. The elderly woman whose pension is disbursed by a biometric algorithm she cannot navigate has not merely been inconvenienced; she has been severed from the relational process through which her dignity and her community's care for her are expressed and renewed.

The Ubuntu philosophy, expressed in the Nguni maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*

(a person is a person through other persons), radicalises this claim: personhood is not merely nurtured by community but constituted through it (Metz, 2011). The solitary data subject is not, in Ubuntu terms, a full person at all. Full humanity is an achievement of right relationship, and any governance system that reduces the person to a set of data attributes – severing them from the relational web through which they exist as persons – commits not merely an administrative error but an ontological violation. Benezet Bujo (1998) has developed Ubuntu into a comprehensive African Christian ethics whose central evaluative question is whether a given action builds up or tears down the community through which persons become fully human. AI systems that replace human relationships with algorithmic transactions are not merely inefficient by Ubuntu standards; they are dehumanising in the most literal sense: they strip persons of the relational conditions necessary for full humanity.

The convergence between this African philosophical account and the Thomistic-Christian account is philosophically significant. Both traditions insist that the human person cannot be reduced to their material or data-representable properties. Both insist that persons are constituted by relationships with God and with community. Both insist that moral governance requires wisdom, conscience, and relational accountability that no algorithm can provide, and that systems which treat persons as means rather than ends commit a fundamental moral wrong. This convergence reflects a deep truth about the human person independently discerned by diverse traditions, providing powerful intellectual ground on which developing nations can resist the anthropological reductionism of imported AI systems (Birhane, 2021). It also challenges the assumption that the theological critique of AI governance is a Western import; it is, in fact, deeply rooted in the African intellectual heritage of the communities most affected by AI's eclipse of the human person.

8. The Theological Imperative: Catholic Social Teaching, *Laudato Si'*, and Liberation Theology

Gaudium et Spes of Second Vatican Council (Catholic Bishops, 1965, §24) establishes that the human person is 'the only creature on earth which God willed for itself' – the theological foundation for the absolute prohibition on treating persons merely as means. When AI systems process citizens as variables in an optimisation function, they violate this principle not merely in its procedural expression but in its deepest theological sense: they deny that the person before them is an end willed by God. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Paul, 1987) reinforces the imperative that all forms of development – including technological development – must be assessed by their contribution to authentic human flourishing, which is never exhausted by material welfare or economic efficiency but always includes the spiritual, relational, and moral dimensions of personhood.

Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015, §106) diagnoses the deeper cultural pathology driving uncritical AI deployment as the 'technocratic paradigm': a spiritual orientation in which every problem is reframed as technical, every value is subordinated to efficiency, and every relationship is mediated by instrumental logic. The technocratic paradigm is a form of spiritual impoverishment. It narrows the human gaze, training it to see only what is measurable and optimisable, while rendering invisible the relational, spiritual, and communal dimensions of human life that cannot be quantified. An AI system trained to predict welfare fraud cannot see a mother's love for her children, a community's solidarity in crisis, or the spiritual resources through which a family endures poverty with dignity. It sees only the data, and what the data cannot represent does not exist. In *Laudate Deum* (Francis, 2023), Francis intensifies this critique, warning that technological systems increasingly escape the control of those they are meant to serve, concentrating power in ways that undermine democratic governance and human dignity. Francis calls for 'integral ecology' evaluation not merely by technical performance but by effects on the full ecology of human life, including its relational and spiritual dimensions (Francis, 2015, §137).

Liberation theology's preferential option for the poor (Gutierrez, 1973/1988; CELAM, 1979) demands a radical inversion of current AI evaluative frameworks. The governing question must not be whether an AI system achieves its stated technical objectives, but whether it serves the woman in a rural Yoruba village whose dialect is absent from any training dataset, the Fulani pastoralist invisible to a land registration algorithm, and the urban poor youth whose informal economic activity is illegible to a creditworthiness AI. If the answer is no and the evidence surveyed in Couldry and Mejias (2019) and Mohamed et al. (2020) overwhelmingly suggests it is then no efficiency gain can justify unreformed deployment. The Dominican tradition's Veritas demands the same: intellectual rigour in refusing technocratic narratives uncritically, interdisciplinary courage in bringing theology and African thought into genuine dialogue with AI governance, and prophetic orientation toward the most marginalised members of the communities the academy is called to serve.

9. Towards A Soul-centred Ai Ethics: Four Normative Principles

9.1 The Irreducibility of Conscience in Governance

Morally consequential decisions affecting human persons may never be fully delegated to algorithmic systems. Conscience the practical judgment of an accountable moral subject is irreducible. AI may assist human decision-making by processing information and surfacing relevant data; it may never substitute for the human judgment that integrates that information with wisdom, compassion, and moral responsibility. In practical terms, every AI-assisted decision affecting access to public services must be subject to human review by a person with the authority and

moral formation to override algorithmic determinations on the basis of conscience. Affected citizens must have a legally enforceable right to a human decision-maker not merely a complaints process, but a genuine encounter with a person capable of being moved by their humanity.

9.2 The Inviolability of Imago Dei

Every AI system deployed in public services must be evaluated by a single, non-negotiable criterion: does it honour or degrade the divine image in every person it affects? This requires, at minimum, that AI systems be explainable to the people they affect; that no citizen be denied access to public services solely on algorithmic grounds without human review; that data collection be governed by genuine consent frameworks respecting moral autonomy; and that the design and evaluation of AI systems include the active participation of the communities most affected particularly women, youth, and other marginalised groups systematically absent from technology governance.

9.3 Relational Personhood as Design Foundation

AI governance must proceed from a relational ontology of personhood rather than the atomistic data individualism that currently dominates AI design. The question of who a person is may not be answered solely by individual data attributes; it must be answered in terms of the person's embeddedness in relationships and communities through which their personhood is constituted. In design terms, AI systems must be evaluated for their effects on community structures and relational networks, not merely individual users. Indigenous and communal knowledge systems must be treated as primary forms of knowledge about human flourishing, not merely qualitative supplements to quantitative data.

9.4 Technological Subsidiarity in Service of the Common Good

Drawing on Pius (1931), AI must serve and never supplant the human and communal structures through which the common good is realised. Subsidiarity requires that AI deployment strengthen, not weaken, local institutional capacity; that data generated by citizens of developing nations remain under the meaningful control of those citizens and their governments; and that AI procurement decisions be evaluated for their effects on local technology ecosystems and indigenous innovation capacity. International AI governance frameworks must be structured to empower the global South rather than institutionalise the current asymmetry of AI power.

10. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the deployment of artificial intelligence in developing

nations constitutes an eclipse of the human person: a systematic displacement of interiority, conscience, relational dignity, and communal embeddedness by algorithmic systems constitutively incapable of honouring these dimensions of human existence. Grounded in the philosophical anthropology of Aquinas, Maritain, and Wojtyla; the African theological philosophy of Ubuntu and Bantu thought as developed by Tempels, Bujo, and Metz; and the theological ethics of Catholic Social Teaching, *Laudato Si'*, and Liberation Theology, the paper has identified four ethical challenges the soulless arbiter, anthropological substitution, communal rupture, and the colonial resurrection and proposed four normative principles in response: the irreducibility of conscience in governance, the inviolability of *imago Dei*, relational personhood as design foundation, and technological subsidiarity in service of the common good.

The claim that the algorithm has no soul is not a counsel of technological pessimism. Algorithms are extraordinary tools capable of processing information at scales no human mind can match and of extending the reach of human services to populations previously beyond their reach. But tools serve ends; they do not choose them. They extend capacities; they do not replace the moral subjects whose capacities they extend. And when tools are deployed in ways that displace rather than serve the moral subjects they are meant to extend when algorithms govern without conscience, decide without wisdom, and process without love they cease to be tools and become, in the theological tradition's precise language, idols: human constructions that claim to represent the human being but distort the image of God beyond recognition.

The Church, the academy, and the civil society of developing nations are called, at this moment in history, to prophetic response. Prophetic witness does not begin with policy recommendations; it begins with naming. It begins with the courage to say, in the face of the technocratic paradigm's seductive narratives of efficiency and progress: this system cannot see the human person. This algorithm has no soul. A governance system built on soulless processes is not a better governance system; it is a less human one. The path forward requires the restoration of the human person in their full theological, philosophical, and communal dignity to the centre of technology governance. It requires faith communities to advocate, with the urgency historically brought to other forms of injustice, for the digitally poor and the algorithmically marginalised. The algorithm has no soul. The human person does. That difference is everything, and it is non-negotiable.

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