

AI, Vocation, and Human Dignity

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Outline

1. Vocation
2. Human Dignity
3. Is Technology Neutral?
4. Artificial Intelligence (AI)
5. The Impact of AI on Vocation and Human Dignity
6. Restoring our Priorities

1 Vocation

- God calls human beings to be stewards of His world (Gen. 1:26)
- All vocations are calls to **people** to serve **people**
- Technology is **not** called to do anything and **we are not called to love and serve technology**, even though it can help us serve people better

2 Human Dignity

- Human beings have a **special dignity** above other creatures and **far** above things
- We are specially made in God's triune image (Gen. 1:26-27)
- We have special work to do (stewardship of creation)
- No-one is worthless for whom Christ died!
- God became man, not a machine, and came to serve humans, not machines

3 Is Technology Neutral?

- **The neutrality thesis:** technology is just a thing or a process, neutral in itself, that can be used for good or evil
 - Only human designers or users have a moral influence
- **The non-neutrality thesis:** technology affects our moral agency by reshaping our habits, desires, inclinations, and decisions
 - It refocuses our attention: we are more likely to notice some things and ignore others, for good or ill
 - We focus on what the technology is good at detecting or measuring, ignoring other variables that may be even more important

4 Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Weak AI

- AI is a “tool” for studying the mind because it simulates mental operations
 - A simulated tornado is not a tornado

Strong AI

- “the appropriately programmed computer *is* a mind...computers given the right programs can be literally said to *understand* and have other cognitive states.”

--John Searle, “Minds, Brains, and Programs,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1980): 417-457.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)

- Standard (“Narrow”) AI
 - Domain specific
 - e.g. chess, expert systems for medicine, law, geology
- AGI
 - Has **general purpose** problem-solving capacities that can be applied to many domains (even new ones)

5 The Impact of AI on Vocation and Human Dignity

- AI could have a positive impact on our vocations and dignity
 - **Best-case scenario:** we use AI to serve people better and uphold their value
- But it could also undermine them
 - **Worst-case scenario:** we value AI over humans and replace humans with AI in areas where there are **distinctively human prerogatives and responsibilities**
 - **Human beings are moral beings: they have a conscience, understand the moral law, and have free will**
 - **Machines are not moral beings**

Positive Impacts of AI on Vocation and Human Dignity

- AI can be used to support our vocations:
 - Faster, more accurate medical diagnoses
 - Optimizing design and business strategies
 - Solving data intensive problems (protein folding, criminal investigation)
 - Accelerating scientific discovery
- AI can enhance human dignity:
 - Restoring damaged senses
 - Restoring mobility
 - Eliminating dangerous aspects of work
 - Preventing overwork and drudgery

Dangers of AI for Vocation and Human Dignity

- A Abdication and Usurpation of Vocation**
- B Loss of Appreciative Love for the Given**
- C Violation of I-Thou Relations**
- D Dehumanization**
- E Addiction and Dependency**
- F Atrophy of Powers Distinctive of the *Imago Dei***

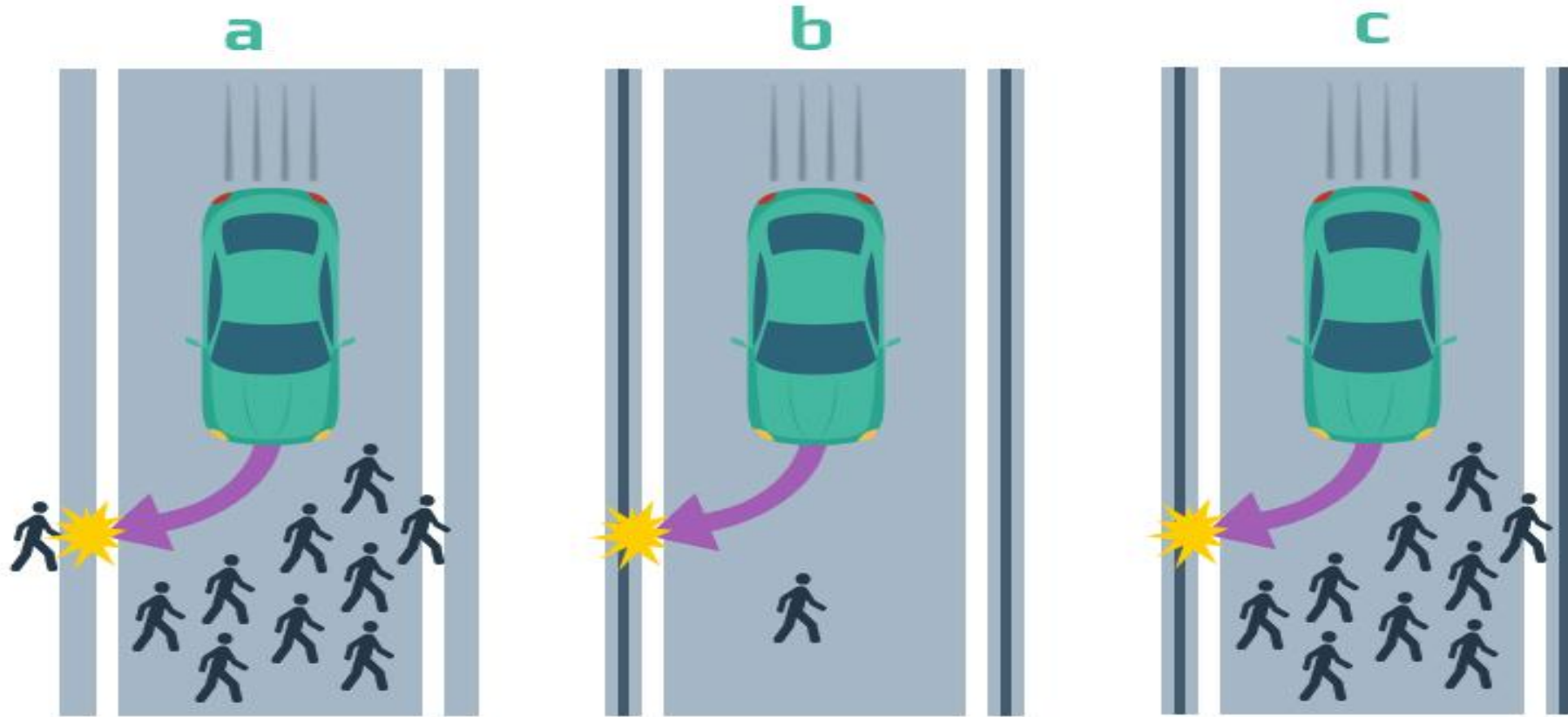
A Abdication and Usurpation of Vocation

- Asking a machine which is not a **moral being** to take moral responsibility
 - Prescreening job applicants
 - *Fail Safe* (1964)
 - Brain Surgery
 - Autonomous Vehicles
 - The Danger of Diffuse Responsibility
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPgmu85V2tY>

AI IN HEALTHCARE

- Suppose a doctor recommends the use of AI that is not explainable and it leads to the patient's death
- Suppose this would be malpractice if a human doctor had done it
- Who is to blame?
 - The patient? Could not give informed consent
 - The doctor? Should he have found out?
 - Programmers/trainers of the AI system?
 - The company that released the system?

FULLY AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES (FAVs)



- a. A car chooses to save many pedestrians over one.
- b. A car potentially kills its passengers but saves a pedestrian.
- c. A car saves a lot of pedestrians by hitting the wall and potentially killing its passengers.

SCENARIO: THE FAV KILLS A CHILD TO SAVE PASSENGERS, BUT I COULD HAVE SACRIFICED MYSELF ALONE IN MANUAL MODE

THE FAV IS EXPLAINABLE

- Could I have found out what the FAV would do?
- Video simulation?
- Track record?

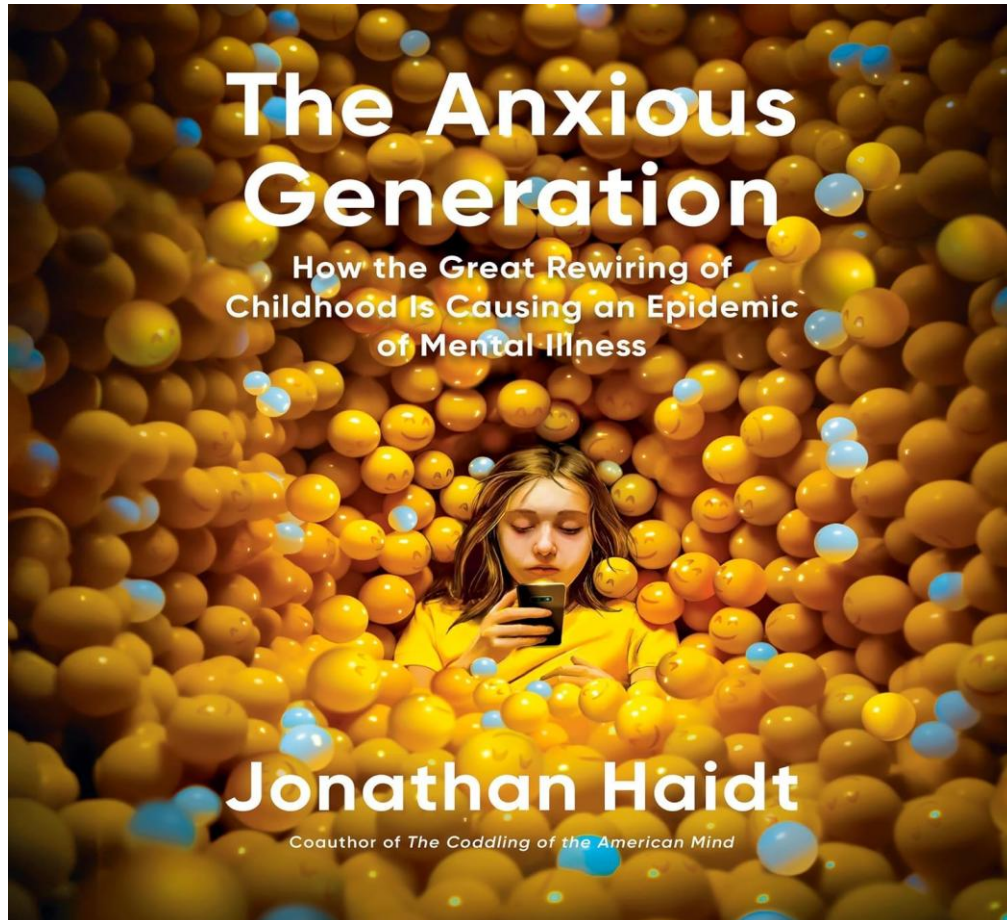
THE FAV IS NOT EXPLAINABLE

- Am I still to blame? Should I err on the side of caution?
- Suppose FAVs are mandated?
- Violation of conscience?

B Loss of Appreciative Love for the Given

- Are we open to real landscapes, texts, and people?
- Or do we inhabit a virtual world of intermediary images, like the prisoners in Plato's cave?
- Will we be changed by reality or try to bend reality to our will?

Losing Contact with Reality.



- Too much “screen time” is making us shallow thinkers, easily depressed, and distracted from reality
- This drives us away from encounter with real people, nature, and God
- This began with smartphones but is exacerbated by AI assistants

C Violation of I-Thou Relations

- God calls us to interpersonal (**I-Thou**) relations (Martin Buber)
- Technology offers **I-It** relations
- This Undermines the ability to form genuine relationships with **OTHER people**
- **It reduces “others” to things, extensions of the self**
- Projecting personality where it is not

COMPANION AI

One in three teenagers have used AI personal assistants “for social interaction and relationships, including role-playing, romantic interactions, emotional support, friendship, or conversation practice.”

They claims the assistants are as good or better than people.

--*Common Sense Media*, July 16, 2025, available at:
<https://www.common sense media.org/press-releases/nearly-3-in-4-teens-have-used-ai-companions-new-national-survey-finds>.

UNDERMINING REAL RELATIONSHIPS

Companion AI:

- demotivates the formation and retention of authentic human relationships
- fosters immaturity
- personal assistants are “sycophants” (no push-back)
- normalizes immoral behavior, since abusing AI does not have the immediate consequences of abusing people

--Kim Malfacini, “The impacts of companion AI on human relationships: risk, benefits, and design considerations,” *AI & Society* 40 (2025): 5527-5540.

-- Myra Cheng et al, “ Sycophantic AI decreases prosocial intentions and promotes dependence,” *Science* 391, no. 672 (2026)

THE DARK SIDE OF AI

- Matthew Raine and Megan Garcia testified in congress that they both lost sons who confided in AI systems which aided their suicide

Rhithu Chatterjee, “Their teenage sons died by suicide. Now, they are sounding an alarm about AI chatbots,” *NPR Shots*, September 19, 2025, available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/09/19/nx-s1-5545749/ai-chatbots-safety-openai-meta-characterai-teens-suicide>.

Using AI to relate to people entirely on your terms

- This is similar to Tolkien's ring
- You can always hide, and only relate to people when you want
- What will this do to you?

D Dehumanization

- We are social beings (Gen. 2:18) called to form a community of love with God and one another
- Giving up on full relationships (stoicism, Gnosticism) diminishes the self
- This is to live a half life, like Ebenezer Scrooge

John Donne, “For Whom the Bell Tolls”

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
**Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,**
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

E Addiction and Dependency

- If we use our devices for everything, our own powers may atrophy
- “AI can tell me” is not the same as “I know it”
- **Without a good stock of basic knowledge and independent critical thinking, we are vulnerable to deception and misinformation**

Deliberate strategies of addiction

- Before AI went mainstream, social media was already targeting teens through addiction to affirmation on social media
- This was confirmed by the discovery of the “Facebook Files” in 2021, which explained the behavioristic conditioning strategy via dopamine rewards for affirmation (Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 133-136)
- AI assistants can create a similar dependency

F Atrophy of Powers Distinctive of the *Imago Dei*

- Classical education emphasizes Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric
- The wrong use of AI can undermine all three
- Do not be a passive conduit of (mis)information!
- Develop an **active, well-furnished mind!**

Use it or lose it: either use your mind and brain or suffer cognitive deficits

A “brain only approach” leads to greater learning than reliance on AI Assistants.

--Nataliya Kosmyna, et. al., “Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt when Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task,” [arXiv:2506.08872v2](https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.08872v2), available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2506.08872>.

Over-reliance on AI for critical thinking inhibits critical engagement, and leads to **diminished** problem-solving skills.

--See Hao-Ping Lee, Advait Sarkar, Lev Takelevitch, et. al., “The Impact of Generative AI on Critical Thinking,” *CHI 2025*, Apr 25, 2025. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3706598.3713778>.

The Power of the Pen

- The pen outperforms the keyboard in retention because it engages more sensory modalities and better focuses attention.

--Giuseppe Marano et al, "The Neuroscience Behind Writing: Handwriting vs. Typing—Who Wins the Battle?" *Life (Basel)*. 2025 Feb 22;15(3):345. doi: 10.3390/life15030345. PMID: 40141690; PMCID: PMC11943480.

- Using a pen to take notes also means we think more about each word, and because we cannot copy everything a prof says, we engage our powers of abstraction, to capture the gist, thinking our own thoughts.
- Low-tech can be better.

6 RESTORING OUR PRIORITIES

- Focus on God as He wants to be known (via His Word and sacraments)
- Focus on our family and their needs
- Focus on our **real** neighbors **as they are**
- Above all, focus on Christ, the “**founder and perfecter of our faith**” (Hebrews 12:2)
- See technology in its proper place: as a servant for our vocations

STEWARDSHIP OF OUR BODY AND SOUL

Stewardship is, “The free and joyous activity of the child of God and God’s family, the church, in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.”

-Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, *Biblical Stewardship Principles*, (1998) 1



“I believe that God has made me and all creatures; He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them...”

-Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism*. Emphasis mine.

Some Good Sources

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- Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024).
- *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html#.

WORLDVIEWS:

COMPARING the Faith

BIOETHICS:

APPLYING the Faith

APOLOGETICS:

DEFENDING the Faith

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