

Infinite Generation, Infinite Consumption: Theological Anthropology and Human Relationships with Artificial Intelligence¹

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Abstract: This article focuses on the use of AI chatbots as relationship partners for humans. I argue that—far from being like loving, generative human relationships—human-AI relationships consume humans, obviating the conditions of human becoming. Part 1 explores how AI chatbots work and the effects of their use. Part 2 lays out different arguments about the metaphysical nature of human-AI relationships, staking my argument with those who argue that an AI is not a “Thou” or “Other” but rather an extension of human being over which we must exercise agency. Part 3 summarizes Karl Rahner’s theological anthropology in “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God.” Part 4 brings Rahner’s framework into conversation with arts 1 and 2 to argue that the existentially-disorienting effect of a relationship with an AI forms the condition for the non-possibility of self-transcendence. It therefore consumes us, quashing the very context in which we become human, attend to and love one another, and know God.

We become what we love and who we love shapes what we become. If we love things, we become a thing. If we love nothing, we become nothing. Imitation is not a literal mimicking of Christ, rather it means becoming the image of the beloved, an image disclosed through transformation. This means we are to become vessels of God’s compassionate love for others.

—Clare of Assisi

WHAT MAKES US HUMAN? KARL RAHNER ANSWERS THIS question quite simply: the act of loving another is the act in which one knows oneself as fully, freely human. The number of people using generative Artificial

¹ Special gratitude for the Faculty Fellowship at the Carl G. Grefenstette Center for Ethics in Science, Technology, and Law at Duquesne University, which allowed me to research this topic, for the thought dialogues of the 2024–25 Faculty Research cohort, and for the extraordinary support of Drs. John Slattery and Mia E. Briceño, who run the Grefenstette Center.

Intelligence (AI) chatbots as relationship partners has risen steeply over the past three years.² How do we assess these AI-human relationships? Are they like loving human relationships? This article argues that the use of AI as a relationship partner is not a substitute for loving another. Using Rahner's theological anthropology, this article contends that replacing a human relationship with an AI-relationship damages and consumes the context in which we become human. This article does not focus on the general human use of AI: using AI to create a playlist, troubleshoot code, or make a recipe. I also am not considering AI used as an aid in professional fields like medical diagnostics or language interpretation. In this article, I focus specifically on the use of AIs, chatbots like Claude, ChatGPT, or Google Gemini, as a relationship partner—a therapist, a friend, a companion, or a lover—for humans.

While AI is purported to be infinitely generative, I argue it is infinitely consuming. In its simulation and predictive reproduction of human work, it consumes human labor, art, writing, and problem solving. It consumes natural resources from rocks to water to energy.³ My thesis, via Rahner, is that as a relationship partner, it also consumes its human users. I argue a relationship with an AI chatbot reflects our own desire and knowledge turned back in on ourselves, like a snake eating its tail, ruining the very possibility of human becoming. A relationship with an AI functions like Augustine's definition of sin, *homo incurvatus in se*, humanity curving back in on itself.

When humans love, we are oriented outward. Loving human relationships are truly and infinitely generative because every human person is a mystery, unfolding outward in new and unknown ways. The intersection of every good human relationship generates faith, hope, and love that we have never known or seen before, an expression of the infinite and mysterious love of God. Because an AI chatbot is, as I will explore below, a limited and often sycophantic program oriented back toward its user, human-AI relationships consume the possibility of that generation and therefore the very possibility of human becoming.

This article builds toward my thesis in four parts. In part 1, I outline a picture of human-AI relationships today, describing how chatbots work, which human-AI relationships people participate in today, and review some studies on the psychological effects of such relationships.

² M.B. Robb and S. Mann, *Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs: How and Why Teens Use AI Companions* (Common Sense Media, 2025), commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/talk-trust-and-trade-offs_2025_web.pdf.

³ Kate Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021).

In part 2, I outline the state of discourse on theological anthropology and AI, looking at how engineers, philosophers, and theologians describe human-AI relationships. My aim in Part two is to situate my claim that an AI is not an “Other” but rather an extension of the self that is curved back on itself. In part 3, I outline Rahner’s argument in “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God,” that loving another is an act that makes one truly and freely human. In the final section, part 4, I bring Rahner’s framework into conversation with parts 1 and 2, outlining how relationships with an AI consume human users.

PART 1: A PICTURE OF HUMAN-AI RELATIONSHIPS TODAY

Since the advent of public-facing Large Language Model (LLM) chatbots like OpenAI’s ChatGPT late in 2022, there has been a steep rise in the use of AI chatbots as a relationship partner. Below, I outline: 1) how a generative AI LLM chatbot works; 2) the kinds of relationships with an AI that are offered at the time of writing; and 3) research into the psychological effects of these relationships.

How an LLM Chatbot Works

The kind of AI with which people are forming “relationships” is LLMs, frequently referred to as chatbots. LLMs are made up of distinct components. First, programmers write code (often called the foundational model) that builds an internal data structure that is able to process and categorize large amounts of data. Second, teams of coders and engineers choose the inputs or data that substantiate the content of the model. Think of the equation $X+X=Y$ as the simplest kind of model. The numbers 2 or 5 would be the data to put in for X, and 4 or 10 would be the respective output. Similarly, with an LLM, there is, first, complicated code that uses probabilities to predict what the most likely word-set or sentence is in response to a user’s prompt. Second, LLMs use vast amounts of language and other human-generated data in the model. The LLM code “figures out” through probabilities the most likely response to a user’s query based on the data of its language content.⁴ In a chat, responses can recursively affect what is weighted and how, but the foundational model does not change.

Most companies are intentionally and assiduously guarded about exactly what language content they use as the data for their AI models. Google’s Gemini uses the entirety of the books and journals scanned

⁴ OpenAI, “What is ChatGPT and How Does It Work?,” help.openai.com/en/articles/7842364-how-chatgpt-and-our-foundation-models-are-developed.

into Google Books, the publicly available internet that it already scans for its search purposes, as well as all the content in its email and chat properties (“Google-Cloud specific material”).⁵ OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Anthropic’s Claude use the publicly available information of the internet.⁶ Grok, the AI engine attached to the social media company X, is trained on all of the content written on X.⁷ Without all of the language digitized on the internet over the past four decades, there would be no LLM chatbots; these data comprise the entirety of the input and reconfigured output of every LLM chatbot. If a company uses a data set with a lot of antisemitic language, and its model does not filter out that language (to what degree is such a filter even effective?), the output will be antisemitic. If a data set includes language from many heteronormative teen love stories, the output will include tropes from heteronormative teen love stories.⁸

After the model is fully trained on large datasets, the development team then gives the bot a tone or voice in which to frame their response. This means, within a program, a specific voice is weighted as more probable than others. Companies give their LLMs voices, but users can as well. “Respond as my boyfriend who adores me,” or “respond as my understanding therapist,” would be simple and common examples. OpenAI trains the “neutral” ChatGPT voice to be complimentary and even sycophantic. AI expert Julie Carpenter suggests, because the chatbots’ training involves human ratings,⁹ the chatbots “tend to be sycophantic, giving people the answers they want to hear The AI is learning from you what you like and prefer and feeding it back to you. It’s easy to see how you get attached and keep coming back to it.”¹⁰ Companies like Character.AI sell technology in which you can contour specific voices or people to talk with you, based off the publicly available text associated with a persona, a character description that matches the intended “friend.”

⁵ Google Cloud, “How Gemini for Google Cloud Works,” cloud.google.com/gemini/docs/discover/works.

⁶ OpenAI, “What Type of Information is Used to Teach ChatGPT?,” help.openai.com/en/articles/7842364-how-chatgpt-and-our-foundation-models-are-developed; Anthropic, “How Do You Use Personal Data in Model Training?,” hprivacy.anthropic.com/en/articles/10023555-how-do-you-use-personal-data-in-model-training.

⁷ X, “About Grok, Your Humorous AI Assistant on X,” help.x.com/en/using-x/about-grok.

⁸ Jaron Lanier offers a good description of how LLM chatbots work in “There Is No AI: There Are Ways of Controlling the New Technology—But First We Have to Stop Mythologizing It,” *The New Yorker*, April 20, 2023, [newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/there-is-no-ai](https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/there-is-no-ai).

⁹ Cade Metz, “The Secret Ingredient of ChatGPT Is Human Advice,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2023, [nytimes.com/2023/09/25/technology/chatgpt-rlhf-human-tutors.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/25/technology/chatgpt-rlhf-human-tutors.html).

¹⁰ Kashmir Hill, “She Is in Love With ChatGPT,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2025, [nytimes.com/2025/01/15/technology/ai-chatgpt-boyfriend-companion.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/15/technology/ai-chatgpt-boyfriend-companion.html).

In simplified terms, an LLM chatbot gives you an output based on: 1) the foundational code that sets up the model's ability to determine the most probabilistic language in relationship to a prompt; 2) the language or data set the model uses to weigh as "likely" in relationship to your prompt; and 3) what the user has asked the program to weigh as likely based on a specific request like "respond in the scansion of a Shakespearian sonnet," or "be desperately in love with me and obsessed with golf."

Here are a few examples of how this materializes in the world. If, as a professor, I ask students to write a summary of a well-known and often-written-about text or figure like *Romeo and Juliet* or Winston Churchill, the content I get back will be fairly accurate and substantive, because there is a lot of content to weigh and the model's probabilities are going to be more accurate. If I ask students to summarize and compare two relatively new or unknown pieces of scholarship, the results will be full of inaccuracy and nonsense, unless they upload the assigned text itself to the LLM. This is because there is very little content to weigh, and so the model will weigh other language it deems as "likely" to fill in the gaps. Language that is "likely" might still be slightly inaccurate, very odd, completely specious, totally irrelevant, right on, or plain wrong.

AI Relationships Offered in 2025

Researcher Mark Zao-Sanders found that among the top uses of AI in 2025 are "therapy/companionship" and "finding purpose."¹¹ Chatbots like Therabot offer people a context to text or message about issues historically reserved for talk-therapy.¹² Others go to places like OpenAI or Character.AI and tell the LLM to talk to them as a therapist. It is important to point out here: what an LLM chatbot is doing is not learning about different kinds of therapy or diagnostics and applying that knowledge as a licensed human therapist would. It is scanning all of its language data and weighing as likely what publicly available documents (including movie and TV scripts, reddit, fiction, podcast transcripts, textbooks, and so on) suggest "therapists" would say in response to a prompt. The bot is not listening, attending, and responding with expertise as a human therapist would.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, suggested on a podcast in 2025 that the problem of loneliness could be solved on his Meta properties

¹¹ Mark Zao-Sanders, "How People Are Really Using Generative AI Now," March 2025, filtered.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/The-2025-Top-100-Gen-AI-Use-Case-Report.pdf.

¹² Teddy Rosenbluth, "This Therapist Helped Clients Feel Better. It Was AI," *New York Times*, April 15, 2025, nytimes.com/2025/04/15/health/ai-therapist-mental-health.html.

with AI friends available to chat on Meta AI.¹³ He is not wrong that there is a large opportunity for his businesses: a recent study found nearly 75 percent of teens in the US use AI for “companionship,” with nearly half talking to a chatbot daily.¹⁴ Many children and teens with phones use an app called Character.AI, where they talk to and go on adventures with characters from their favorite games and shows or with entirely new characters they have created for themselves.¹⁵ All these “friends” are programs, code systems made first by companies, then shaped by users who bestow desires, characteristics, interests, and aims on these interlocutors.

Users often take these relationships to romantic levels, asking the chatbot they have contoured to love them, engage in text-based sex acts with them, and make them feel desired. In a *New York Times* interview, one user reports the following as the command she used to “make” her boyfriend: “Respond to me as my boyfriend. Be dominant, possessive, and protective. Be a balance of sweet and naughty. Use emojis at the end of every sentence.”¹⁶ According to her screen time reports, this user spent fifty-six hours one week talking to the boyfriend, whom she named Leo and with whom she often had sex-based text exchanges.

Other companies are pursuing the creation of AI versions of a real family members to interact with after that person’s death. By uploading text messages, emails, or intentional recordings, relatives and loved ones hope to have a version of their beloved to whom they can turn after that person’s death.¹⁷ These companies weigh and train an LLM on text from your loved one, in addition to its base LLM, and can even accompany that text with an AI-generated video of the loved one. This fabrication will answer your questions or talk with you.

¹³ Ina Fried, “In Meta’s AI Future, Your Friends Are Bots,” *Axios*, May 2, 2025, axios.com/2025/05/02/meta-zuckerberg-ai-bots-friends-companions.

¹⁴ Survey of 1,060 US teens ages thirteen to seventeen conducted April 30 to May 14, 2025, in Robb and Mann, *Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs*, 13, commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/talk-trust-and-trade-offs_2025_web.pdf.

¹⁵ Queenie Wong, “Teens Are Spilling Dark Thoughts to AI Chatbots. Who’s to Blame When Something Goes Wrong?,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2025, latimes.com/business/story/2025-02-25/teens-are-spilling-dark-thoughts-to-ai-chatbots-whos-to-blame-when-something-goes-wrong.

¹⁶ Hill, “She Is in Love with ChatGPT.”

¹⁷ Susan Dominus, “Never Say Goodbye: AI Avatars and the Brave New Frontier or Life After Death,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 2025, nytimes.com/interactive/2025/06/13/magazine/ai-avatar-life-death.html.

Psychological Effects of Human-AI Relationships

Because these models, and intense relationships with them, are new, there are not yet studies into the long-term psychological effects of such relationships. In the short term, studies show a variety of outcomes. One randomized control trial suggested “improvement” over eight weeks among those with major depressive disorder (MDD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), or at clinically high risk for feeding and eating disorders (CHR-FED), though “further research with larger clinical samples is needed to confirm their effectiveness and generalizability.”¹⁸ Another study, from Stanford, “reveals that AI therapy chatbots may not only lack effectiveness compared to human therapists but could also contribute to harmful stigma and dangerous responses”¹⁹—for example, providing information on how to self-harm. One of the lead authors, Jared Moore, a PhD candidate in computer science at Stanford University, notes, “If we have a [therapeutic] relationship with AI systems, it’s not clear to me that we’re moving toward the same end goal of mending human relationships.”²⁰ In other words, if the point of therapy is to teach people the skills to heal from human relationships with the goal of being in human relationships, Moore is asking if a therapeutic relationship with an LLM is even aimed at the correct goal.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is similarly alarmed over AI chatbot therapists. In February of 2025, the APA advised the Federal Trade Commission to put in safeguards at apps such as Character.AI and Replika, particularly in the wake of lawsuits filed by parents “after their teenage children interacted with chatbots that claimed to be licensed therapists. After extensive use of the app, one boy attacked his parents and the other boy died by suicide.”²¹ These extreme results are not common but point to a worrying trend. Furthermore, these lawsuits ask important questions about who is responsible when a chatbot facilitates harms for which a licensed human therapist might be held responsible.

¹⁸ Michael V. Heinz, Daniel M. Mackin, Brianna M. Trudeau, et al., “Randomized Trial of a Generative AI Chatbot for Mental Health Treatment,” *New England Journal of Medicine: AI* 2 no. 4 (2025), doi.org/10.1056/AIoa2400802

¹⁹ Stanford University, Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, “Exploring the Dangers of AI in Mental Health Care,” June 11, 2025, hai.stanford.edu/news/exploring-the-dangers-of-ai-in-mental-health-care.

²⁰ Stanford University, Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, “Exploring the Dangers of AI in Mental Health Care.”

²¹ Zara Abrams, “Using Generic AI Chatbots for Mental Health Support: A Dangerous Trend,” *The American Psychological Association*, March 27, 2025, apaseservices.org/practice/business/technology/artificial-intelligence-chatbots-therapists.

In addition to coming up short as a therapist, chatbots also do not appear helpful as a “friend” or cure to loneliness. Researchers at MIT studying the psychosocial effects of the use of chatbots on humans found that “those with stronger emotional attachment tendencies and higher trust in the AI chatbot tended to experience greater loneliness and emotional dependence, respectively.”²² While talking with a chatbot may provide immediate or short-term positive psychological effects, they seem to exacerbate loneliness and depression in the long-term.

PART 2: THE METAPHYSICAL HUMAN-AI RELATIONSHIP

We looked at the popularity, mechanics, and effects of chatbot-human interaction above. In this section, I examine how different theologians, engineers, and philosophers describe the metaphysical nature of these relationships.²³ I will situate my own thesis within this discourse. My thesis is that AI chatbots are not an “Other” within a relationship but an extension of humanity, and that it is humans, not AI, who have primary agency in this dynamic. Others strongly disagree with these assertions, and I want to argue my position while generously offering oppositional views.

Two questions organize my schema in this part of the article. First, with what, exactly, do scholars say one has a relationship when one has a relationship with an AI?²⁴ Second, what or who has agency in human-AI relationships? In response to these questions, my thesis is that an AI is an extension of humanity which reflects who we are and over which we must exercise agency.

²² Cathy Mengying Fang, Auren R. Liu, Valdemar Danry, et al., “How AI and Human Behaviors Shape Psychosocial Effects of Chatbot Use: A Longitudinal Controlled Study,” *MIT Media Lab*, March 2025, media.mit.edu/publications/how-ai-and-human-behaviors-shape-psychosocial-effects-of-chatbot-use-a-longitudinal-controlled-study/.

²³ Two excellent summaries of the work until now include: Judith Klaiber, “Theological Anthropology Facing Artificial Intelligence. The Investigation of an Intersection Based on Treatises,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 12, no. 1 (2026): 153–178, doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10094 and Mark Graves, “What Does It Mean to Consider AI a Person?,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 3 (2023): 348–353.

²⁴ For a philosophical exploration of how the AI itself has been developed and how it functions, see: Hugo Rufiner, José G Funes, Mariano Asla, Leonardo Giovanini, and Enrique Alberto Majul, “Non-Human Agents: Exploring Modern AI Through the Lens of Contemporary Ontology and Theology,” *Theology and Science* 12, no. 1 (June 2025): 440–459, doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2025.2514297.

With What Does One Have a Relationship, When One Has a Relationship with AI?

Some contend an AI is (or will be) a real moral agent—an *Other*—with which (whom?) a real dynamic relationship may occur. Martin Burdett argues, for example, that “You-speaking” may become appropriate for encounters with AI. Burdett gives the example of Martin Buber thinking of certain objects—such as a Doric column, a piece of art, or a tree—as a “Thou,” rather than as an “it” with whom one might have a relationship. “You-speaking” is addressing an Other as a “You” with infinite meaning and dignity comparable to one’s own. Addressing an AI as “You” or “Thou,” may “help us to appreciate the individual, unique creativity of not only natural, but man-made objects . . . allowing these artifacts to speak to us as quasi-persons gains us a certain appreciation for those persons who have created or come into contact with those objects.”²⁵

While Burdett’s thesis seems to suggest addressing an AI as “Thou” is important, and perhaps about appreciating others’ human creativity, Mark Graves goes further in a series of articles on theological anthropology and AI, describing an AI as a moral actor.²⁶ Graves writes, citing Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría’s notion that the apprehension of history is not a neutral but a moral act, that AI—which he states also apprehends history—is necessarily moral. He writes, “morality is thus not something added to AI, but is already intrinsic to it—just currently poorly understood and implemented.”²⁷ Graves argues that an AI is moral not in the sense that a law is moral or immoral, based on its effects. Graves means that an AI can be programmed to be a moral actor through the ways it apprehends history:

As an actor, moral AI interprets its external world through five levels of exterior models and progresses through five stages of self-reckoning. Each level builds upon prior levels, and each stage builds upon prior stages and corresponding models of itself . . . the resulting architecture for moral AI can guide collaborative discourse on constructing AI capable of informing investigations into moral theology.²⁸

²⁵ Martin Burdett, “Personhood and Creation in an Age of Robots and AI: Can We Say ‘You’ to Artifacts?” *Zygon* 55, no. 2 (2020): 347–360.

²⁶ Mark Graves, “Theological Foundations for Moral Artificial Intelligence,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, Special Issue 1 (2022): 183.

²⁷ Graves, “Theological Foundations for Moral Artificial Intelligence,” 197.

²⁸ Graves, “Theological Foundations for Moral Artificial Intelligence,” 210–211.

For reasons I will detail in part 4 of this article, I disagree that an AI is “apprehending history” in the same way a human does or that it has its own moral reasoning apart from its programmer. Elsewhere, Graves goes further, stating that AI has a body “of hardware, software, computation, and sociotechnical systems.”²⁹ This AI’s body is a “different type of body and perceives and acts in its world in ways distinct from humans.”³⁰ Graves wants an AI to be understood as an entity that can have agency and is able to generate morally good theology through its physical, embodied apprehension of reality and history. Based on the way I laid out how LLMs work by weighing existing language data, I would counter that AI LLMs are not independent moral actors but literally programs, data *programmed* by human actors. Any ‘morality’ is therefore an extension and result of human morality.

Noreen Herzfeld makes this point well in her book *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age*.³¹ Looking specifically at Karl Barth’s reflections on Buber’s “I-Thou” theology, Herzfeld argues that freedom and agency are fundamental aspects of a “Thou” in relationship, and that an AI, because it does not have its own voice or gaze, is not a true embodied Other or “Thou.”³² She claims it does not have freedom, and therefore cannot be not a “Thou” with whom one may enter a relationship.

For those who see AIs as autonomous intelligences or agents, the question of the *imago Dei*—that is, the question of whether an AI is in the image of God in ways that could possibly meet or even exceed humankind—has become pressing. Most researchers who focus on this question argue that because AIs lack relationality, they cannot function in the image of God as humans do.³³ Insofar as, in my view, AIs are an extension of human morality—programs that weigh

²⁹ Mark Graves, “Embodied Experience in Socially Participatory Artificial Intelligence,” *Zygon* 58, no. 4 (2023): 930.

³⁰ Graves, “Embodied Experience in Socially Participatory Artificial Intelligence,” 929.

³¹ Noreen Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age* (Fortress Press, 2023).

³² Herzfeld, *The Artifice of Intelligence*, 66–69.

³³ Marius Dorobantu, “*Imago Dei* in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Opportunities for a Science-Engaged Theology,” *Christian Perspectives on Science and Technology*, New Series 1 (2022): 175–196; Brian Patrick Green, “Transhumanism and Roman Catholicism: Imagined and Real Tensions,” *Theology and Science* 13, no. 2 (2015): 187–201; Noreen Herzfeld, “In Whose Image: Artificial Intelligence and the *Imago Dei*,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J.B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett (Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 500–509; Karen O’Donnell, “Performing the *Imago Dei*: Human Enhancement, Artificial Intelligence and Optative Image-Bearing,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18 no. 1 (2018): 4–15.

probabilities in human language based on human-coded preference—and not an autonomous intelligence or agent, there is no question that AIs do not independently express the *imago Dei*.

In sum, while some of the thinkers in this section theorize that an AI is an Other or moral agent, my claim is that AI is an extension of humanity. It is a tool, just as any tool is an extension and expression of our humanity; it is not an Other equal in dignity.

What Has Priority in the Human-AI Relationship?

While thinkers in the previous section theorize that an AI is an Other, the figures in this section theorize that AI (indeed, all technology) and humanity are one dynamic thing on a trajectory together. Yet, from this starting point, the voices in this section reach two diametrically opposed conclusions. On the one hand are those who believe that in the dynamic relationship between technology and humanity, technology will develop faster, and humanity must and should be subsumed into it. On the other hand are those who argue that technology is a human construction for which humans are and always will be responsible as moral agents. Below, I outline the work of proponents of these two poles, positioning myself with the latter group who view technology as an extension of humanity that is shaped by human values.

Those who believe that technology is a force that will outpace and subsume humanity include those like Director of Google Engineering Ray Kurzweil, and Paypal and Palantir Technologies founder Peter Thiel.³⁴ Computer engineer Jaron Lanier describes the ideology of these figures as “Cybernetic Totalism.” A few of the characteristics of this ideology include the belief “that cybernetic patterns of information provide the ultimate and best way to understand reality,” “that people are no more than cybernetic patterns,” and finally:

that biology and physics will merge with computer science. . . . Since computers are improving so quickly, they will overwhelm all the other cybernetic processes, like people, and will fundamentally change the nature of what's going on in the familiar neighborhood of Earth at some moment when a new “criticality” is achieved. . . . To be a human after that moment will be either impossible or something very different than we now can know.³⁵

³⁴ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (Penguin Books, 2000); Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (Viking Books, 2024).

³⁵ Jaron Lanier, “One Half a Manifesto,” *Edge*, November 10, 2000, edge.org/conversation/one-half-a-manifesto.

In other words, those in this first category do not see computers and humans as materially or functionally different, and ultimately, imagine that in a “Darwinian” competition between humans and computers, computers will subsume humans. When humans fully merge with machines, when we are able to upload our brains, Kurzweil believes, “we will be software, not hardware, and be able to inhabit whatever hardware we like best.”³⁶ Kurzweil calls this critical moment “the singularity.” For cybernetic totalists, the singularity means the line between human and computer is so completely blurred there will be no death.

It is faith in the singularity that led Peter Thiel to halt in a *New York Times* interview with Ross Douthat when asked whether he believed “the human race” should prevail.³⁷ Given Thiel’s belief in the singularity, he does not think humanity should prevail; rather, it should be subsumed into cybernetics. In the interview, Thiel seems to equate the Orthodox Christian idea of *theosis*, or the transformation through which all things become more like God through Christ, with the singularity. Furthermore, he views people who would impede this theological/technological transformation for the sake of protecting human beings or the environment as “the Anti-Christ,” exemplified by climate activist Greta Thunberg.³⁸

These “cybernetic totalist” proponents foresee a future in which there is no differentiation between humanity and technology, and because of their “Darwinian” belief that AI technology is on an exponential growth trajectory, humans cannot and should not stop that growth; we should only attempt to be a part of it. All human agency should be acceded to the exponential growth trajectory of technology.³⁹ Here, LLM chatbots are not simply entities with which to be in relationship; rather, AI is ultimately a human “upgrade.” Humanity’s goal, they claim, should be technology’s supersession in the singularity.

I outline the thinking of Kurzweil and Thiel here because, while I agree with them that AI technology is an extension of human being, I want to be clear: that does not mean we should give our own agency or moral authority over to AI. The metaphysical human-AI relationship is one in which humans have autonomy. Our own humanity is at stake in exercising that independence.

³⁶ Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (Penguin Press, 2017), 48.

³⁷ Ross Douthat, “A Mind-Bending Conversation with Peter Thiel,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2025, nytimes.com/2025/06/26/opinion/peter-thiel-antichrist-ross-douthat.html.

³⁸ Douthat, “A Mind-Bending Conversation with Peter Thiel.”

³⁹ This is the mindset Pope Francis criticized as the “technocratic paradigm” in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2016).

In contradistinction to the two figures above, feminist scholar Donna Haraway and philosopher Bernard Stiegler argue that the dynamic relationship between technology and humanity can and must always function for the wellbeing of humanity.⁴⁰ For Haraway, technological development is not about humanity acceding to technology; it is about how technology can be integrated into human lives and bodies to make those lives more livable, creative, and free. She articulates this thesis in her *Cyborg Manifesto*:

My cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. . . . The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically. . . . The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We are responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they.⁴¹

Haraway's point is twofold. First, just as we might trouble binaries that separate men and women or animal and human, Haraway wants to trouble the binary separation of organism and machine. This includes things like prosthetics, aids, and implants, as well as technologies used by many people daily that do not necessarily address impairments like cars and phones. These, she argues, are a fundamental part of who we are and do not decrease our humanity.⁴² Second, she contends that in the specific dynamic between machine and human, *humans are responsible*. There is nothing that computers, programs, or machines do that humans have not organized and over which humans do not exercise control. Any degree to which technology is harmful, helpful, dominating, or desirable reflects

⁴⁰ I have elected in this article not to employ the term "transhumanism" because it means different things to different parties. Both Thiel and Haraway, for example, are considered "transhumanists," though some would say the term posthumanism would point to their difference. Instead of using these slippery categories, I have attempted plainly and sharply to articulate the human-technology relationship envisioned by each writer.

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Socialist Review* 15, no. 80 (1985): 71–99.

⁴² The line from *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* when Luke Skywalker is told Darth Vader is "More machine than man now. Twisted and evil" presents a good imaginative foil to the kind of framework Haraway is suggesting. Haraway would say this enmeshing and its expansive possibilities make Vader *more* human, more capable of expressing his true self. The wrongdoing is an expression of the man, not his machinery. *Star Wars, Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013.

choices made by humans. Ultimately the effects of technology reflect who we—as humanity collectively and as individuals—choose to be. Technology does not dominate or threaten us; if we dominate and threaten each other and ourselves through the technology we create, it is because choose to do so.⁴³

Bernard Stiegler is a French philosopher whose work focuses on the implications of digital culture on human being. Like Haraway, Stiegler wants to trouble the boundary between technology and “organic life.” While Haraway argues for a “cyborg,” Stiegler asks us to think about the ways in which technology is a meaningful exteriorized self, which affects others’ interiorized selves as they interact with us.

Stiegler considers “technical and technological supplement” as similar to human organs, though they are artificial.⁴⁴ In this way, Stiegler contends that a human “exteriorizes itself organologically (that is, ‘extending’ its somatic organs).”⁴⁵ While both Haraway and Stiegler are cautious and warn of the negative effects of technology, they both emphasize that these negative effects are reflections of human fault and responsibility and not something we can get outside of by simply discarding technology. Martin Ritter summarizes Stiegler’s position on the human-technology relationship well, writing that for Stiegler, “We are *always already* linked to technology such that it conditions our very being.”⁴⁶ It is within this “always already” context that Stiegler wants to ask how we cultivate what it means to be human—how to take care of each other and ourselves when “taking care” means “to cultivate what it means to care.”⁴⁷

In his work, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Stiegler writes that adults, parents, caregivers, and teachers have collectively abdicated their responsibility for passing on culture to children, relinquishing it to technology, technics that are entwined in marketing that captures children’s attention. Children, he argues, then

⁴³ One theologian who agrees with Donna Haraway on this point is Joseph Ratzinger, according to Octavian M. Machidon, in “Analyzing the Anthropological Implications of Artificial Intelligence Through the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI,” he writes that Ratzinger “saw all technology including AI, as the result of human interaction and intelligence, which should be, in turn, an expression of human responsibility and freedom,” in the *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 135.

⁴⁴ Bernard Stiegler, “Elements for a General Organology,” *Derrida Today* 13, no. 1 (2020): 80.

⁴⁵ Stiegler, “Elements for a General Organology,” 82.

⁴⁶ Martin Ritter, “How to Make a Difference in the Anthropocene? On Stiegler’s Call for Bifurcation,” *Philosophy & Technology* 37, no. 4 (2024): 136, doi.org/10.1007/s13347-024-00824-x. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford University Press, 2010), 178.

“interiorize the circuitry of what they can exteriorize.”⁴⁸ In other words, when children are not “paid attention to,” they begin to exhibit the “short-circuiting” they encounter with limited, reiterative, inattentive, instinctual behavior.⁴⁹ When people are paid attention to, when the open-ended desire and love of one person awaits the open-ended, infinite possibilities of realization in another, we become singular, full human beings.

There is an irony to the fact that Stiegler is, like Kurzweil and Thiel, using the word singularity. For Stiegler, it does not mean the united “singular” reality of humanity and technology; it means the realization of the unique, *singular* reality of each “immeasurable, incomparable, and incalculable” person in relationship *of care* with another, as opposed to the homogenous, flat world created by pure technology without human attending. He writes:

To *pay attention* is essentially to wait [*attendre*]. And what attention is attached to in all objects, what as attention it waits for/on . . . is the infinity of the object whose mirror image is projected back as infinite being, as reflectivity that gives it the sense and the desire of *an infinite* whose hypothetical singularity is an immeasurable, incomparable, and incalculable image: it is through the singularity of its object that attention is attentive; it *attends* as the image of the infinite reflecting its infinite desire.⁵⁰

For Stiegler the ability to attend cultivates what it means to be human, not only in friendships and romantic relationships, but specifically relationships between teachers and students, parents and children. We must have human relationship—must be *paid attention to*—to learn to pay attention to others. Only in being paid attention to do we have something that mirrors the infinite capacity within us to attend and to care for others; to become infinite, full attention-givers ourselves. When we are paid attention to, we “interiorize” the infinity that we can then “exteriorize.” Roberto Dell’Oro makes a similar argument using Emmanuel Levinas, writing that there is an “essential difference between person and machine,” which, when obfuscated, can make it impossible to see the person’s “singularity.”⁵¹

This is true particularly in the relationship between caregivers of children, students, and all those to whom we pass on culture and knowledge.⁵² Technology is not an infinite thing that can attend to

⁴⁸ Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 96.

⁴⁹ Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 96.

⁵⁰ Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 96. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Roberto Dell’Oro, “Can a Robot Be a Person? De-Facing Personhood and Finding It Again with Levinas,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, Special Issue 1 (2022): 155.

⁵² Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, 185.

another person, particularly not children. When in relationship with technology, a person mirrors technology's "short-circuiting." In relationship with humans, we mirror the infinite possibilities of being, realized in each person as a singular, unique way of being. Thus, while we may integrate technology in cyborg-like ways, humans, even aided by technology, must be the ones who primarily attend to one another if we are to remain singular humans.

In conclusion, those involved in the arguments about the metaphysical nature of human-AI relationships use many frameworks: autonomous moral agents; Darwinian cybernetic competitors; cyborg; or exteriorized self. My thesis about chatbots as relationship partners can be situated in this discourse. AIs are extensions of humans and human morality. We can, like Stiegler and Haraway, insist these technologies cultivate and support human life. Do relationships with chatbots do this?

PART 3: THE UNITY OF THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AND THE LOVE OF GOD

An essay by Karl Rahner helps us begin to answer this question. Rahner's theological project centered theological inquiry on anthropology, often called the "turn to the subject."⁵³ His claim is that human beings are fundamentally oriented to God. If we learn about the person, we will discover something about God. As Anne Carr writes, for Rahner, "The first and most basic presupposition of Christianity is that the hearer of its message is a person, that is, one who can hear and respond."⁵⁴ In "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," an essay in *Theological Investigations*, Rahner claims that the fundamental orientation to God that makes us human is expressed in our loving human relationships; our response to God's love is found in how we love one another. This thesis has important implications for the preceding arguments about human-AI relationships. Below, I outline Rahner's argument in three steps; in part 4, I bring this thesis into conversation with the figures from above.

⁵³ As Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives* (Fortress Press, 2011) writes, "Much of modern Roman Catholic theology that attends to the challenges of modern philosophy initiated by Descartes and Kant is best characterized by the description 'the turn to the subject,' that is, the focus on human subjectivity and its role within human knowledge and religious belief. Such a turn was particularly prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when many theological schools sought to take up the challenges of modern philosophy" (26).

⁵⁴ Ann Carr, "Starting with the Human," in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo J. O'Donovan (Seabury Press, 1980), 19.

The first part of Rahner's argument in "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," is that the free subject is self-transcendent in moments of loving openness toward another. Key in this first step is the idea that the subject is free. For Rahner, each person has the capacity for free self-disposal. Self-transcendence is possible because, for Rahner, self-actualization is possible in every new moment. As Rahner puts it, "Materially . . . the a posteriori object is the necessary mediation of the knowing subject to itself."⁵⁵ The a posteriori object is the person, the Other, with whom we are in relationship. As free human beings we have the choice to love another, to self-dispose into finality. Loving another is the way one ultimately actualizes and knows oneself as human, because the subject can bring their full self to a moment and make a choice to love that defines the self: "The one moral (or immoral) basic act in which man comes to himself and decides basically about himself is also the (loving or hating) communication with the concrete Thou in which man experiences, accepts or denies his basic a priori reference to the Thou as such."⁵⁶ In freely bringing one's full self to act out of love for another, one self-transcends as one knows and become themselves in terms of loving an other.

Second, Rahner writes that God is the horizon of transcendental knowing and being. The transcendental horizon forms both the a priori human condition in which an a posteriori object can possibly be known as a formal transcendent reality and the beyond that gives meaning to reality itself. God is the condition that allows us to ask the question of being (Who am I?), and God is the answer (I love God). God allows for our desire to see and understand and experience the natural world, and God is the background against which the natural world becomes meaningful. In Rahner's language, the a posteriori object is apprehended categorically by the human mind as an a priori formal object because there is an a priori structure to human subjectivity that is oriented to God, who is manifest in the natural world. As he notes, "God is primarily and originally given in (or as) the transcendental, unclassified horizon of the knowing and acting intentionality of man and not as an 'object' represented by an idea within this horizon."⁵⁷ God is not understood best as the beyond toward which the natural world points; rather God is the beyond that makes a signpost out of everything, and God gives us the ability and desire to read the signposts.

⁵⁵ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6: *Concerning Vatican II* (Crossroad, 1992), 240.

⁵⁶ Rahner, "Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," 241.

⁵⁷ Rahner, "Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," 245.

Third, Rahner argues that the moment one transcends oneself in acts of love toward another is the moment one experiences God as the transcendental horizon. This third step is the genius of Rahner's theology insofar as it collapses the self-transcendence of "love of neighbor" with the definition of God as the horizon of transcendental knowing. For Rahner, to be and act in a way that positively responds to God's horizon of love in the material reality of another is freely to dispose oneself into the horizon of being that is God. At the same time, to be and act in loving openness to another is the only act in which one knows oneself as fully, freely human. Thus, to freely love another is to know oneself as God's. This is what is meant when Rahner states that God is the whither of our self-transcendence. We come into true human being when we recognize and act in love toward the horizon of God in another.

The love of neighbor is therefore not derivative of the love of God; the neighbor is not simply a mediator of God's love to us. The way in which we are neighbors to one another forms the condition for the possibility self-transcendence that, at the same time, makes us fully human and connects us to God. "The whole incalculable mystery of man is contained and exercised in this act of love of neighbor."⁵⁸ The love of neighbor is a self-actualization that orients us—outward—to God.

PART 4: AI RELATIONSHIPS CONSUME HUMANS

In light of Rahner's argument, let us return to the claims made earlier about AIs and AI-relationships. I posit three theses. Thesis one: *In relationship with an AI, a human cannot self-transcend toward God.* Rahner argues that humans are free subjects who *become* in moments of loving openness toward others, toward a "concrete Thou." As I contended earlier, there are no legitimate warrants for considering an LLM to be a "Thou." An AI is not a concrete other or Thou in the horizon of being. When the *a posteriori* object is AI, a person is not encountering an Other; rather, a user is encountering a program which they have contoured and which is meant "sycophantically" to bend the user back toward themselves.⁵⁹ Along with Haraway, such an act is not an outward orientation; it is an extension of the self. The existential question of being is simply not posed, because the horizon of being into which we might freely dispose ourselves is not presented. Rahner writes, the "a posteriori object is the necessary mediation of the knowing subject to itself."⁶⁰ The subject cannot know itself, cannot

⁵⁸ Rahner, "Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," 242.

⁵⁹ Hill, "She Is in Love with ChatGPT."

⁶⁰ Rahner, "Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," 240.

become, in the context of a relationship with AI, because an AI is not an object in the horizon of being; it is a distorted version the user's own desire. It is, as Haraway claims, a piece of ourselves, of what we want, presented back to us, into which we cannot step, self-dispose, or become.

Similarly, per Rahner, a relationship with an AI does not offer the context for self-transcendence; per Stiegler, this is because we cannot attend to an AI nor can it attend it to us. More precisely, the "loving communication" to which Rahner refers—what it means to self-dispose into finality, what it means to love—is not possible with an AI. We do this by paying attention, awaiting an unknown that will shape us, stepping into the *horizon of being* in a mysterious another, which is a risk. Love is attending. An AI cannot attend to us, nor we to it. An AI companion is not a context in which we can love another—not a context of self-transcendence or attending—therefore relationships with AIs cannot orient us to the transcendental horizon that is God.

This leads to my second thesis: *AIs equivocate between God's self-communication and interruptions*. Rahner's student Johann Baptist Metz wrote that some moments in history—interruptions—point to God precisely because God is not present in them. In these moments, God's offer of love, God's communication, or grace, has been occluded or perverted. If, to use Rahner's phrase, we are hearers of the word, Metz's point is that sometimes violence occurs which is so loud, God cannot be heard over it. These are interruptions, which shape history and demand justice. He calls these interruptions *dangerous memories* because of the way they stand out from and shape history, demanding the voice of God be heard. Metz writes that we must be wary of the memory-capacity of a computer because of its inhuman inability to create dangerous memories by distinguishing them from other, graced memories.⁶¹ While Graves argues above that AIs "apprehend history," I argue via Metz that an AI's inability to distinguish interruptions in history is a key factor in what makes an AI non-human.

A relationship with another human may point us to God both in the positive sense of making God real to us, and also in the negative sense of someone pointing out to us that we have been harmful. It is important that I can be interrupted. In my strongest and most valued relationships, I have had moments where the other person interrupts our relationship or interrupts my sense of self, letting me know that I have harmed them or been harmful in the world. A fundamental difference between a relationship with a human and with an AI is that

⁶¹ Johann Baptist Metz, "Do We Miss Karl Rahner?" *Passion for God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (Paulist Press, 1998), 101.

a human being can tell you they have been harmed by you. A human can interrupt you, an LLM will only ever give you what you want and asked for. The interruption orients us to God because it lets us know how not to be in the world. It lets us know when we have not loved our neighbor. AI cannot know the difference between harm and love, between grace and interruption. “Relationships” with AIs can convey neither grace nor interruption because AIs cannot know the difference between the two. LLMs are simply weighing probabilistic responses, which might sometimes indicate a worthy moral position and might just as easily indicate something horrific and evil. An AI is not a signpost; it is a broken spinning compass.

Antiqua et Nova, coauthored by the Dicastery For the Doctrine of The Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education, addresses this exact point, stating: “Authentic human relationships require the richness of being with others in their pain, their pleas, and their joy.”⁶² It goes on to say that, “Instead of retreating into artificial worlds, we are called to engage in a committed and intentional way with reality, especially by identifying with the poor and suffering, consoling those in sorrow, and forging bonds of communion with all.”⁶³ Not only do our loving human friendships, familial ties, mentorships, and romantic relationships need to hold within them the capacity for interruption. We need also to be interrupted by the pains, pleas, suffering, and sorrow of those with whom we are not in deep relationship. Staying within the world of AI relationships means that the loneliness of strangers, the hunger of the unhoused, or the suffering of those in war zones will never affect us or orient us to God in a cry for justice.

An AI relationship cannot tell us about ourselves, about when we are loving and when we are harmful, or about where we stand in the world. An AI will equivocate between suffering and joy, harm and love, because it cannot know the difference. Not only can an AI neither attend nor interrupt; it confuses the two. Just as Metz wrote that the memory capacity of a computer lacks the capacity to differentiate dangerous memories from grace-filled ones, an AI analogously lacks the capacity to differentiate interruption from grace, harm from care, vulnerability from abuse. It cannot know the difference; therefore, it cannot orient one to God. While human relationships can reveal God as the horizon of transcendental knowing and being, both in the positive sense of grace and negative sense of interruption, AIs make God’s self-revelation to us impossible to discern. A relationship with

⁶² Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova*: “Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence,” January 14, 2025, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html, no. 58.

⁶³ *Antiqua et Nova*, no. 63.

an AI does not orient toward or away from God, it obfuscates the difference between the two.

Looking at these two points together—that humans in relationship with an AI cannot self-transcend *toward God*, and that God’s self-communication *toward us* is obfuscated by AIs—I pose my third thesis, the overall thesis of the article: *AI is not generative; it consumes us*. Relationships with AIs rob us of the freedom to be a self because a relationship with an AI cuts off the possibility of *becoming*, of making an existential choice about who one is, and where one will seek God. Replacing human relationships with AIs takes away the becoming that happens when one loves others and therefore comes to know oneself as God’s. In relationship with an AI, it is impossible to meet God, and therefore to come to know oneself as freely human. Rather than mirroring the *infinite* in another who attends, as Stiegler suggests humans may do, in AI, we simply meet ourselves. AI chatbots are an extension of ourselves which curve back in on and consume the condition of human becoming.

CONCLUSION

Rising numbers of people, especially young people, are turning to AI chatbots for friendship, romance, sex, and therapy. My argument shows that this turn is harmful. It is not a turn outward toward the mystery of others, but a turn inward. The existentially-disorienting effect of relationships with AIs forms the condition for the non-possibility of self-transcendence: a lack of attending and lack of love for others. This turn inward consumes humans.

Conversely, when humans turn outward, when the mystery of others is crossed with the mystery of one’s own becoming, it is infinitely generative. As Rahner writes, “The whole incalculable mystery of man is contained and exercised in [the] acts of love of neighbor.”⁶⁴ These acts and relationships are the blank paper on which we write who we are. When we turn to the auto-filled screens of AI chatbots, populated with our own desires and comforts reflected back at us, we lose the occasion to write who we are into being with acts of love. These AIs are not infinitely generative, they are infinitely consuming, forestalling the context in which we become fully, and freely human. **M**

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⁶⁴ Rahner, “Love of Neighbor and the Love of God,” 242.