EXPERIENCING MORTALITY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction

The process of digitization brings about tectonic changes for both individuals and social life.[1] The massive use of digital technology is radically changing our interpersonal relationships, work processes, social and political life, and, ultimately, our experience of ourselves.[2] To a certain extent, the very nature of being human is changing. The *conditio humana* does not seem to be the same now, due to the omnipresent and strongly emphasized interaction with digital means. Until now, the awareness of finitude and mortality, the longing for transcendence, and religiosity have been seen as specific characteristics of the human species.

As far as religious life is concerned, many people, at least in the Western world, are noticing that fewer and fewer people are identifying themselves as religious and that sanctuaries are becoming increasingly empty. Some, including Armando Matteo, the current Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, argue that many of today's contemporaries, especially the young, no longer have an antenna

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[2] David Kraner, "The Internet, the Problem of Socialising Young People, and the Role of Religious Education," *Religions* 14 no. 4 (2023): 1–15, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/4/523.

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for God and for religious messages. The Christian narrative does not resonate with their life experiences and deepest longings.[3] The Jewish historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari, who will be discussed at length below, is also convinced that the traditional role of religions is diminishing in digital culture, as the scientific interpretation of the world and secular ethics, along with a general pluralism of opinions and relativism of views, are now dominant. Harari attributes the main authority to algorithms, which are increasingly trusted by humans. Instead of priests, people rely on advice shaped by algorithms. And even for the most fundamental decisions in life, such as choosing a life partner. Large technology companies have therefore replaced the religious structures of the past.[4]

Others are of the opinion that digital culture is more open to transcendence and religiosity than secular culture was, which was based on science, materialism, and immanence. Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek are convinced that technology can mediate and even enhance experiences of transcendence. The technology depends on the reality that we did not create. "We can only grow artificial bladders because nature happens to work in such a way to make this possible... technological power cannot exist without accepting a transcendent order in which one operates."[5] The authors show very illustratively how technical tools can also intensify our wonder and point us toward the sacred and the transcendent: "The microscope does not reduce nature to completely controllable scientific entities, but has rather disclosed a hidden world… More knowledge does not necessarily eradicate the mysteries that surround us, but rather intensifies them."[6] Religion can evolve, in their view, alongside technology, especially through renewed spiritual openness.

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[3] Armando Matteo, *La prima generazione incredula: il difficile rapporto tra i giovani e la fede* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2017), 19.

[4] Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: a Brief History of Tomorrow* (Toronto: Signal Books, 2016), 172–181.

[5] Ciano Aydin and Peter-Paul Verbeek, "Transcendence in Technology," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 291–313, https://doi.org/10.5840/techne2015121742.

[6] *Ibid*. 306.

Humans have always longed to go beyond their limits. The experience of transcendence is the experience of something/someone beyond us, beyond our control. It means recognizing our limits and striving to go beyond them. What does the omnipresent context of digital technology mean for our perception of transcendence? On the one hand, it transports us to a parallel, virtual world, where we can, for example, experience things beyond our physical reality with the help of VR tools. On the other hand, it brings much more control over our lives and choices, and makes the world increasingly unified. Algorithms play a crucial role in this, with efficiency being the primary driver. Is it even possible to escape from this total embeddedness in the digitally intertwined context of life? Is this even a legitimate desire, in the sense of preserving certain qualities that we have traditionally attributed to human beings, such as free will, the capacity for empathy, personal responsibility, and the search for transcendence? Are we at a turning point in human history when, as Ray Kurzweil predicted, we are approaching singularity and immortality, which will replace the traditional religious belief in eternity?

First, I will critically evaluate the analysis of the aforementioned Jewish historian Harari on the transition from the *human condition* to the *posthuman condition*, marked by desires for immortality, happiness, and divinity. He also believes that a new religious belief, which he calls *dataism*, is on the horizon. Harari will be counterbalanced by the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas, who opposed the prolongation of human life and advocated for the preservation of the *human condition*, which includes mortality. His philosophy of the organism will also pave the way out of our entrapment in materialist *dataism*. Subjectivity, spirituality, and transcendence cannot be the result of material processes and powerful algorithms, but are endowed foundations of existence over which humanity has no complete authority or control. Jonas' analysis will then lead us to a theological reflection, where we will learn from biblical anthropology the duality of human existence: on the one hand, we are fragile and transient; on the other, we are endowed with an indelible dignity and eternal. Special attention will be paid to the significance of experiencing vulnerability and awareness of mortality in the pursuit of transcendence.

The Challenge of the Posthumanist Desire for Immortality

In his provocative work *Homo Deus* from 2015, Harari stated that the ultimate goal of human endeavor is to conquer death, which will take the human species to the next level. After humanity has reduced mortality from starvation, diseases, violence, and war in recent centuries, new aims are ahead of us, which can be achieved with the help of modern technology. These new ambitions are: immortality, happiness, and divinity. Humans want to upgrade themselves, which Harari defines as the transition from *homo sapiens* to *homo deus*. "In seeking bliss and immortality, humans are in fact trying to upgrade themselves into gods. Not just because these are divine qualities, but because in order to overcome old age and misery, humans will first have to acquire godlike control of their own biological substratum."[7] He makes the bold claim that for modern humans, death is not a metaphysical mystery, but rather a technical problem that can and must be solved. "In the twenty-first century, humans are likely to make a serious bid for immortality."[8] In his mechanistic interpretation, the causes of death are always technical failures, for which we can find technical solutions. These initial statements suggest a reductionist worldview, where the whole is made up of individual particles and the connections between them.

The latest achievements in biotechnology, regenerative medicine, nanotechnology, and AI promise to extend the human lifespan indefinitely. Harari rightly notes that prolonging life will not make people immortal, but potentially a-mortal. They could still die due to war or accident. Therefore, in his view, these people will actually be even more nervous and insecure. "We mortals daily take chances with our lives, because we know they are going to end anyhow. So we go on treks in the Himalayas, swim in the sea, and do many other dangerous things like crossing the street or eating out. But if you believe you can live forever, you would be crazy to gamble on infinity like that."[9]

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7 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 44–45.
8 *Ibid.*, 27.
9 *Ibid.*, 25.

We know that many of the richest people of our time want to be immortal. Ray Kurzweil is convinced that by 2050, we will have reached a level of technological development that will eliminate mortality and make immortality possible.[10] Harari, however, does not share this conviction and warns over-optimists against disappointment: "My own view is that the hopes of eternal youth in the twenty-first century are premature, and whoever takes them too seriously is in for a bitter disappointment. It is not easy to live knowing that you are going to die, but it is even harder to believe in immortality and be proven wrong."[11] This happened to the famous transhumanist FM2030, who believed that science would advance to the point of granting him immortality. He chose the name because he was convinced that by around 2030, all of us humans will have the chance to extend our lives forever. Sadly, he died from pancreatic cancer in 2000, aged 70. He had his body cryopreserved in the hope that science would be able to bring him back to life in the future.[12]

Let us return to Harari's analysis of the human condition today. He argues that *homo sapiens* is changing fundamentally through the process of digitization and that we are one of the last generations of the species. Our desire for happiness and immortality is to upgrade ourselves into gods through three paths, "biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings."[13] The first option is to increase the biological capacity of the organic body, as *homo sapiens* is not the end point of natural evolution. The second is to combine the organic body with inorganic devices to create various forms of *cyborgs*, e.g., by embedding microchips in our bodies. The third option is even more revolutionary, relinquishing control of the brain and allowing inorganic systems to take over the entire system, without the constraints of organic chemistry (*non-organic artificial intelligence*). Harari agrees that we do not know where such developments will lead us and that we

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[10] Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (London: Penguin Books, 2024), 215–216.

[11] Harari, *Homo Deus*, 31.

[12] Abou Farman, "Transhumanism," *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, published 8 September 2022, http://doi.org/10.29164/22transhumanism.

[13] Harari, *Homo Deus*, 45.

cannot imagine the consequences of these changes. "Once technology enables us to re-engineer human minds, *Homo sapiens* will disappear, human history will come to an end and a completely new kind of process will begin, which people like you and me cannot comprehend."[14] Harari is convinced that we want to upgrade our body and mind to escape age and death, but we do not know what new divine possibilities will come with them. The fact is that scientific research and technological progress are advancing much faster than most people can keep up with.[15]

Harari's book *Homo Deus* aims to stimulate the vast population in a provocative way to think about the prediction that in the 21st century, humankind is likely to aim for immortality, bliss, and divinity: "This prediction is less of a prophecy and more a way of discussing our present choices. If the discussion makes us choose differently, so that the prediction is proven wrong, all the better."[16]

Harari believes that technology is already replacing religion in the sense that it provides ultimate authority on truth and meaning, and is gaining more and more trust from people, allowing them to rely on it for their decisions. As mentioned earlier, algorithms are meant to replace religious authorities. Harari notes that a new religion is gradually emerging, which he calls *dataism*. This is the belief that all of reality can be expressed through data. "Dataism says that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing."[17] A very interesting interpretation is that natural algorithms have evolved within humanity over the last 70,000 years, determining human decisions based on biochemical connections. The *dataism* project aims to link these biochemical algorithms with the electronic algorithms that have been developing since the concept of the Turing Machine. Behind all our decisions, therefore, there is supposed to be a very complex network of algorithms that

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14 *Ibid.*, 47.

15 Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Technology as the Elixir of Immortality – Resurgent Philosophical and Spiritual Enigma of Human Imprisonment," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 83, no. 4 (2023): 973–984, http://doi.org/10.34291/BV2023/04/Platovnjak.

16 *Ibid.*, 55.

17 *Ibid.*, 326.

operate on either a biochemical or a digital basis and follow exactly the same mathematical laws. Within this view, the barrier between animals and machines has been overcome, a development that Harari believes will lead to the dominance of electronic algorithms in the future. This should also lead to the recognition of a common denominator for all scientific disciplines. "It gives all scientists a common language, builds bridges over academic rifts and easily exports insights across disciplinary borders. Musicologists, political scientists, and cell biologists can finally understand each other."[18] Harari is convinced that the electronic algorithms will undoubtedly be better than biological brains for processing data. Thus, in the future, more and more decisions in human life should be left to computer algorithms, as they can take into account a much larger amount of reliable data and also have greater processing power.

Data integration is becoming a source of unlimited knowledge, which is supposed to lead to the belief that the world's data processing system is omnipotent. Harari compares the religious dimension of *dataism* with traditional religions in this way: "Traditional religions told you that your every word and action was part of some great cosmic plan, and that God watched you every minute and cared about all your thoughts and feelings. Data religion now says that your every word and action is part of the great data flow, that the algorithms are constantly watching you, and that they care about everything you do and feel."[19] This is why people in the digital age are so busy converting their experiences into data. Our experiences have value when they are converted into data and shared in a common data system. "Dataism adopts a strictly functional approach to humanity, appraising the value of human experiences according to their function in data-processing mechanisms. If we develop an algorithm that fulfills the same function better, human experiences will lose their value. Thus, if we can replace not just taxi drivers and doctors but also lawyers, poets, and musicians with

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*, 342.

superior computer programs, why should we care if these programs have no consciousness and no subjective experiences?"[20]

After this provocative analysis by Harari, the question arises whether we are doomed to *dataism*. Are algorithms really going to shape our lives in the future? Is it really the end of *homo sapiens* and are we in a phase of transition to a new form of life? And after all, is not the fundamental claim that "the universe consists of data flows" actually metaphysical, or even religious in nature? This claim cannot be proven on a material basis, but is a philosophical or religious assumption of such a belief. Our most significant criticism of *dataism* is that it cannot be verified by dataistic elements, but instead assumes the truthfulness of the presupposition that all reality is composed of data.[21] However, as I will try to show below, we can reasonably doubt the validity of such an assumption. *Dataism* is another in a series of reductionist views of reality that exclude the realms of subjectivity, consciousness, and transcendence.

However, we agree with Harari that we are at a turning point and that the choices we make today influence the lives of future generations to a much greater extent than in the past. The Italian theologian Paolo Benanti also suggests that the last generation of humanity as we have known it is coming, and that the future of the human species and the planet will depend on the choices made by this generation. He speaks about a change of epoch: "the new epoch is characterized by new human attitudes to facing the finitude and radicality of human existence, by new deep and vital values that animate humans to think, feel, and act"[22]. He calls this last generation *Omega*, and the new world "a synthetic world."[23] Generation Omega will no longer be able to postpone three key issues: the relationship of humanity to the environment, the relationship of humanity to technology, and the relationship of humanity to itself.

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[20] *Ibid*., 344.

[21] Branko Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu: eksistencialno fenomenološki pristop," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 1 (2024): 24, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/01/Klun.

[22] Paolo Benanti, *Digital Age: Teoria del cambio d'epoca: Persona, famiglia e società* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo Edizioni, 2020), 186.

[23] *Ibid*., 187.

In responding to the mentioned challenges, I find the reflection of the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903–1993) on mortality as a burden and a blessing for human beings still relevant. His existential analysis of being, which originates from the experience of a living organism, also enables us to confront the challenges of *dataism*.

Jonas's Understanding of Mortality as a Precondition for Life

Jonas states that mortal humans have always longed to escape death and cherished the hope of eternal life. He is convinced that humans are the only living beings who know that they will die, who mourn their dead, and bury them. For him, the grave is one of the symbols that mark the specificity of humans in relation to other living beings.[24]

For Jonas, mortality is "an essential attribute of life as such."[25] The basic structure of every living being is a constant exposure to death. Death is always on the horizon of the existence of every living being. Death and life presuppose and make each other possible. Without death, there is no new life. For Jonas, the living organism is a paradigm of being that presupposes for its existence a constant exchange of matter and the *freedom* of the subject. For Jonas, all living beings (including plants and animals) have a certain degree of freedom. Every living being must constantly exchange matter with its environment because the parts of it that consist of matter are perishable. Nevertheless, it maintains its identity precisely through this constant passage of foreign matter. The material identity, therefore, does not coincide with the identity of the living being. "It is the same never materially and yet persists as its same self *by* not remaining the same matter."[26] This is why the phenomenon of organic life does not correspond to the mathematical-mechanical worldview, because the teleological endeavor of the organism cannot be

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[24] Hans Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen und metaphysische Vermutungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1992), 34–49.

[25] Hans Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," *The Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 1 (1992), 34.

[26] Hans Jonas, *The phenomenon of life: toward a philosophical biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 76.

reduced to a mechanical causality. According to Jonas, the appearance of life represents "an ontological revolution in the history of 'matter'."[27]

Compared to inorganic things, living beings have an active role in maintaining their existence. "Organisms are entities whose being is their own doing. … being for them consists in doing what they have to do in order to go on to be."[28] For Jonas, the living body therefore has a paradoxical character: on the one hand, it is "a composite of matter", on the other hand, it "is not identical with this or any such simultaneous total, as this is forever vanishing downstream in the flow of exchange."[29]. A living being is distinct from the matter of which it is composed and is not merely the sum of that matter. Jonas argues that every living being has a certain amount of *freedom* that allows it to maintain its identity over time. Life affirms itself and considers its existence as something worthwhile. "Continued metabolism is such a reclaiming, which ever reasserts the value of Being against its lapsing into nothingness. Indeed to say yes, so it seems, requires the co-presence of the alternative to which to say no."[30]

Jonas states that the aging process is not characteristic of all living beings; however, it is characteristic of all warm-blooded animals, which leads him to believe that it is an evolutionary advantage, otherwise, this development would not have occurred. Jonas reflects on the general evolutionary aspect of death and dying. Evolution itself presupposes the finitude of individual life, since the principle of survival is based on "the use of death for the promotion of novelty."[31] This involves "a mixture of death extrinsic causes (foremost the merciless feeding of life on life) and the organically programmed dying of parent generations to make room for their offspring."[32] With the emergence of humans, another form of mortality began to prevail. Although mortality is, on the one hand, a burden and brings the fear of death into life, Jonas also sees it as a blessing. He wonders whether it is right and meaningful

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27 *Ibid.*, 81.
28 Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," 34.
29 *Ibid.*, 35.
30 *Ibid.*, 36.
31 *Ibid.*, 37.
32 *Ibid.*

to eliminate death and prolong human life indefinitely. He elaborates arguments from a social and ecological perspective, as well as from the point of view of personal satisfaction.

From a social perspective, Jonas points out that new births are conditioned by the death of the previous generation. A general prolongation of life would lead to the abolition of reproduction. In fact, we see that in societies where the population is aging, there are fewer and fewer births. Jonas presents a black scenario of a boring world "of old age with no youth."[33] Everyone already knows each other, and the element of surprise when new people appear is lost. In contrast, he emphasizes the value of youth and the renewal of life. He refers to Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality,"[34] which is as essential an attribute of the human condition as mortality. Natality means the ability of a person always to start anew, to see the world in a new way, with their own eyes, to begin where they came from. This happens in a very concrete way with the actual birth of a new child, which is why childbirth is essential for the existence and development of society. "Youth, with its fumbling and follies, its eagerness and questioning, is the eternal hope of mankind. Without its constant arrival, the wellspring of novelty would dry up, for those grown older have found their answers and gotten set in their ways. The ever-renewed beginning, which can only be had at the price of ever-repeated ending, is mankind's safeguard against lapsing into boredom and routine, its chance of retaining the spontaneity of life."[35] Every newborn is unique and unrepeatable, not just a repetition of their ancestors, but a completely new and surprising combination. This natality is made possible by mortality, or, as Jonas writes, "the dying of the old makes place for the young."[36]

Jonas adds another argument against prolonging human life, namely, in terms of ecological responsibility. At a time when many are talking about the overpopulation of our planet, it would be even more irresponsible to seek solutions by prolonging human life. As he has shown,

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[33] Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: in search of an ethics for the technological age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19.
[34] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11.
[35] Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," 39.
[36] *Ibid*.

we need young people for society to develop creatively in the future; therefore, it is ethically responsible to reject projects that extend human life. Jonas links mortality and creativity in human history and thus sees mortality as a blessing rather than a curse.

However, mortality is also a blessing for the individual. We know that many people today want to become immortal. They might acknowledge that society needs new children to be born, but they, as individuals, will allow themselves to live indefinitely, to be the exception to the natural rule. Would an unlimited life be desirable if we could live in a state of eternal youth, without the ailments and difficulties of old age? Jonas is convinced that the answer is no, even from a purely selfish point of view. Even if medical advances enable our cells to rejuvenate, our life history will still accumulate, raising the question of our brain's capacity to remember and process all this information. "Old age, in humans, means a long past, which the *mind* must accommodate in its present as the substratum of personal identity. The past in us grows all the time, with its load of knowledge and opinion and emotions and choices and acquired aptitudes and habits and, of course, things upon things remembered or somehow recorded even if forgotten."[37] Jonas is convinced that the capacities of our brains are limited and that humans do not have the power to erase old content from their consciousness and memory, and thus create new space. In his view, unlimited human existence is only possible at the cost of "either losing the past and with it our real identity, or living only in the past and therefore without a real present."[38] We would most likely live in an anachronistic world where we would not understand the innovations created by new generations.

Jonas is convinced that, even from an individual's point of view, mortality is above all a blessing, though of course, he does not mean that human death should be hastened. "It is a duty of civilization to combat premature death among humankind worldwide and in all its causes—hunger, disease, war, and so on."[39] Awareness of the finiteness of our existence encourages us to give meaning and significance to the

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37 *Ibid.*, 40.
38 *Ibid.*
39 *Ibid.*

days we have been given. Jonas invites his readers to reflect on *memento mori* or the sentence from Psalm 90: "Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom," rather than striving for an infinite prolongation of life. "Perhaps a nonnegotiable limit to our expected time is necessary for each of us as the incentive to number our days and make them count."[40]

Theological Reflection

In the third part of our paper, I will follow the fundamental conclusion of Jonas's philosophy of the organism, that the phenomenon of life cannot be explained in a materialistic way, that life is therefore not the result of complex material processes in nature, but that it is the inner principle of freedom or subjectivity that gives the living being the identity to establish its being. In applying Jonas's philosophical biology to contemporary debates in the field of digital technology and artificial intelligence, we can establish a strong skepticism about the possible emergence of consciousness and subjectivity from complex algorithms. Mere causality cannot explain the emergence of consciousness and subjectivity. Branko Klun, like Hans Jonas, starts from an existential-phenomenological understanding of being and comes to the following conclusion: "Man continues to live his life from an 'inner' perspective, which in an inextricable interconnectedness includes his embodiedness (physicality), his manifold feelings (emotionality), his interpersonal relations (sociality) and, of course, his reason (intellectuality), which is not limited to the narrow rationality of logical processes. (...) Our primary experience of life and the life-world associated with it thus remains open to the experience of passivity, to the experience of givens that elude our control—to the unpredictable and unexpected events that enable us to grasp in a holistic way what is meant by the word 'gift'."[41] Within the experience of a life-world beyond the merely manageable world, a genuine experience of transcendence can take place.

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[40] Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility,* 19.

[41] Klun, "Problem religioznega izkustva v digitalno transformiranem svetu," 31.

The experience of life is about being in relationships, being dependent on others, and at the same time being attuned beyond oneself. "Life is essentially relatedness to something, and relationship as such implies a 'transcendence', a referring beyond oneself from the part of that which maintains the relationship."[42] It is the lived body that enables an individual living being to be in the world, in exchange with the world, and at a distance from the world. Humans are relational beings within their embodiment.[43] The body gives them individuality and sets boundaries in relation to their surroundings.[44] The body allows us to be at once connected and detached. It is a characteristic of human existence that we have the freedom to go beyond the given: from the finite to the infinite, from the temporal to the eternal, from the conditional to the unconditional. Jonas writes: "The very idea of being able to grasp the infinite, the eternal, the absolute, as even the youthful mind, which is only just trying, is an indication of this transcendent freedom of the mind, which its own Eros drives."[45]

At the starting point of our discussion, we saw how humans in the digital age aspire to immortality and divinity, but seek to achieve this without death and salvation (or a Savior). People want to be the creators of a new project that, through digital technology, would prolong human life indefinitely. As I have already pointed out, such a project is based on the tacit metaphysical assumption that the whole of reality is a mere collection and intersection of data and that it is possible to create a new world governed by sophisticated algorithms. Finally, I would like to add some theological reflections to the largely philosophical discussion so far. I believe that authentic transcendence cannot be achieved through digital technology, but only through an embodied, vulnerable, and mortal existence. I base this position on the assumption that the inner experience of subjectivity is only possible within an embodied

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42 Hans Jonas, *Organismus und Freiheit: Ansätze zu einer philosophischen Biologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 16.

43 Bojan Žalec, *Človečnost v digitalni dobi: izzivi umetne inteligence, transhumanizma in genetike* (Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta, 2023), 15, https://www.teof.uni-lj.si/uploads/Zalozba/ZnK86-Zalec-clovecnost_elektronska.pdf

44 *Ibid*., 54–60.

45 Jonas, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 223.

and transient being. It is an experience that I cannot master or control, but that is essentially given to me. In fact, it is a fundamental religious experience.

For a more in-depth theological analysis, I will focus on the first three chapters of Genesis, which present in a symbolic way a holistic view of humans and their fundamental existential questions, including the question of the origin of death and evil in this world. The biblical view of the human consists of two basic components: first, the human is a created being, one of the created beings, fragile, vulnerable, transient, finite, and mortal; at the same time, the human is made in the image of God, which gives a special dignity, holiness, infinity, and eternity.[46] Human existence takes place within this tension, which has also been expressed through the Christian tradition in the spiritual dynamic between *imago* (image of God) as the ultimate vocation and *similitudo* (likeness of God) as the dynamic process of realizing one's life in accordance with one's vocation to live as God's image. "The dignity that results from being made in the image of God must prove itself on his path to Godlikeness by acting responsibly in his relationships."[47] What man being created in God's image means is not precisely explained in the Bible. Throughout the history of theology, the attributes of God's image have been identified as reason, free will, dominion over creation, relationality, and love. But it is undoubtedly connected to the special place human beings have in creation. "This creature is unlike others, and is intended to rule and have dominion over the whole. It is therefore appropriate that God, the sovereign Creator of the universe, has in a sense replicated himself in creating this unique creature, the human."[48]

God created man and woman in His image and commissioned them to participate in the creation process. In the first creation narrative in the Bible (Gen 1:1–2:3), God does not act as a self-sufficient Creator,

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[46] Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik* 84, no. 4 (2024): 835–846, http://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak.

[47] Andreas Büsch, "Das Geschöpf im Netz: Auf der Suche nach dem digitalem Selbst," in *Theologie und Digitalität: Ein Kompendium*, ed. Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, and Joachim Valentin (Freiburg: Herder, 2021), 202.

[48] Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

but invites his created beings to continue his work on their own. He invites the earth to put forth vegetation, plants, and fruit trees; he commands the birds and the fish to multiply and be fruitful. The same happened in the creation of land animals; God invited the earth to bring forth living creatures of every kind. But when God created humanity, his act was something special. "Rather than create by simple *fiat* or through surrogates such as earth or water, God himself decisively steps in to make humankind."[49] As God's image, human beings receive a creative spirit and, with the help of reason and the ability to make free choices, intervene in their environment and change it. Human activity is therefore part of the creation process, so we can also understand the rapid technological developments in the field of digitization within this paradigm.

A more complete picture of humanity's place in creation is given by considering the second creation account (Gen 2:4–25), which emphasizes humanity's connection to the earth from which they are taken, suggesting frailty and transience. It is clearly implied that God breathed into people a spirit (Gen 2:7), which means that his spiritual dimension is not a product of the material world. Nor is it a dualistic view of humans, where one could distinguish between body and spirit, but the whole person is made a "living being" by the breath of God. In an illustrative way, Arnold explains: "The 'living being' is not some disembodied component of the human being, distinct from his physical existence; a 'soul' comprising one portion of a person's whole being. Rather the 'living being' denotes the totality of the human."[50]

The human is placed in the garden with the specific task of being a gardener "to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15), which means a mission to creatively transform the given world, while at the same time maintaining order and harmony in creation. Of particular interest for our topic, however, are the two trees mentioned in the narrative (Gen 2:9). The tree of life represented divine power, perhaps an unnatural prolongation of life, or even immortality, which is hinted at in Gen 3:22. Alongside this tree of life in the garden, there is also "the tree of the knowledge of good

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[49] Arnold, *Genesis*, 42–44.
[50] *Ibid.*, 58.

and evil," which God forbids people to eat from. "The one requirement for maintaining the equilibrium of peace and tranquility in the garden of Paradise, indeed for maintaining life itself, was the willingness to hear God's command to stay away from a single tree."[51] People are given the freedom to order the world in their own way, but must also respect the limits God gives. We know that Gen 3 describes how man broke God's command and lost his Edenic state. And the following chapters (Gen 4–9) show how people have abused the various acquisitions of their spirit, thereby destroying the fundamental relationships with other people, nature, the self, and God. "Technologically assisted domination without relationship to God, nature and one another is presented as a sure road to disaster."[52]

The good news from the first pages of the Bible is that God does not leave humans alone, but comes to them after every misuse of the gifts and rupture of the relationships with a redemptive act that helps them to live out their humanity. Even the expulsion from paradise, which seems like a curse, enables humans to accept their limitations and vulnerability, allowing them to have loving and responsible relationships. I share Arnold's thesis on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden: "To be sure, God resolutely throws them out and locks the door behind them. But in so doing, God is also protecting humans from overreaching their grasp, almost as though God is ensuring their continuing humanity as opposed to a lesser option—that of becoming trapped in immortality."[53]

Mortality is, therefore, a blessing for humans because it confronts them with the responsibility of realizing their Godlikeness within a limited time. "Mortality should not be understood as a transition to 'nothingness', but as the loss of all the masks, camouflages, images and forms of protection that characterize our existence."[54] Mortality indicates our

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[51] *Ibid*., 59.

[52] AI Research Group for the Center for Digital Culture of the Dicastery for Culture and Education of the Holy See, *Encountering Artificial Intelligence: Ethical and Anthropological Investigations* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2024), 50.

[53] Arnold, *Genesis*, 72.

[54] Kurt Appel, "The Price of Prayer," in *In Praise of Mortality: Christianity and New Humanism,* ed. Kurt Appel (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022), 173.

uniqueness and irreplaceability. The first chapters of the Bible are intended to help humans recognize and accept their role in this world and to be aware of their fragility, limitations, and transience. "It is part of human existence that a person is fallible. One cannot be a human being other than a fallible human being."[55]

The fundamental temptation of humanity to "be like God" (Gen 3:5) returns in a new guise in the digital age. As Harari says, *homo sapiens* wants to become *homo deus*. But I do not find the label *homo deus* appropriate. Perhaps *homo technologicus* would be more suitable, because this is about boosting human capabilities through modern technology, not about truly achieving God's transcendence. Harari himself suggests that the divinity that humans yearn for in the digital age is more akin to the divinity of the Greek gods or Hindu devas than to the divinity of the God of monotheistic religions.[56] In our view, it is the authentic experience of transcendence, which is uncontrolled and unavailable, that enables people today to avoid succumbing to the dangers of data totalitarianism. In this respect, I agree with Valentin, who argues that theological content is particularly relevant for facing contemporary digital challenges: "The mysterious character of God and his personality, a clear acknowledgment of human corporeality and thus defectiveness, temporality and mortality as well as imperfect, unpredictable communication are obviously more 'of the time' and should be actively introduced into a public debate on humanism, ideology and digitalization more than is currently considered appropriate within the Church and theology."[57]

Karl Rahner, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, repeatedly emphasized the mystery and unavailability of God. Humanity, being finite and transient, can never determine who the infinite God is. "The infinite horizon, which is the term of transcendence and which opens us to unlimited possibilities of encountering this or that particular

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55 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 277.

56 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 47–48.

57 Joachim Valentin, "Versprechen der Digitalisierung und Verheißungen Gottes," in *Theologie und Digitalität: Ein Kompendium*, ed. Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, and Joachim Valentin (Freiburg: Herder, 2021), 367

thing, cannot itself be given a name."[58] The finite person cannot dispose of an infinite God, but the perception of transcendence happens precisely because of the experience of finitude: "In its very constitution a finite spirit always experiences itself as having its origins in another and as being given to itself from another—from another, therefore, which it cannot misinterpret as an impersonal principle."[59]

I believe that the experience of transcendence is not the result of complex connections or intertwining of data, but of the real existence of Someone who, while connected to this world, also infinitely transcends it. God is not one of the elements, but the One who is at once in everything and at the same time beyond everything.

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[58] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 61.

[59] *Ibid.*, 75.

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