

The Disquieting Misnomer in Artificial Intelligence (AI); is it “artificial” or “algorithmic”?

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Abstract

*This article, a book review-cum-critique, raises the question: should AI be referred to as “Artificial Intelligence” or as “Algorithmic Intelligence”? The document under review, *Antiqua et Nova*, is issued by the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education (2025) and it explores the obtaining understanding of AI in relation to human intelligence. *Antiqua et Nova* sets out human intelligence as a composite of both *intellectus*—the intuitive grasp of truth—and *ratio*—the discursive reasoning process. It contrasts this composite with AI systems that rely primarily on statistical inference and pattern recognition; AI is devoid of true logical deduction and conscious understanding. Therefore, this review-cum-critique of *Antiqua et Nova* suggests replacing “artificial” with “algorithmic” for a more accurate signification of AI’s procedures. This seemingly semantic shift may better highlight the disparity between human intelligence—which integrates spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational dimensions—and AI’s purely computational operations.*

Beyond the definitions, the critique draws out some inferences for university lecturers: their primary responsibility is to engage students’ human intelligence—respecting their cognitive, embodied and relational, lived experience rather than examine AI outputs that may be presented in lieu of students’ intellectual work. And, from the affective domain, the critique cites the death of Sewell Setzer III, following interactions with an AI

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chatbot (as reported by The Guardian) to illustrate the danger of conflating algorithmic responses with genuine human connection. The critique concludes by reiterating Antiqua et Nova's message: AI is a tool to serve humanity—not attenuate the richness of human intelligence—which perspective invites educators and all, to engage critically with AI while safeguarding human dignity.

Artificial Intelligence: the ubiquitous technology

AI, the technological mimicry of human intelligence, has become fashionable in many social and cultural groups around the world. From humble villages to technical hubs, to scientific academies, even to the Catholic Church, AI is designed, used, critiqued and tweaked one way or another. In fact, both the concept and its realisation have surpassed the realm of fashion; the two are seeping into the *ordinary* and *everyday* by inundating the fabric of society albeit through different registers; with varying value scales; and distinct shades of meaning. AI has become ubiquitous and therefore unavoidable in public discourse.

But what is AI? Is it an intelligence comparable to, or equal to, the human faculty? And do we come to its knowledge (AI) only through relation and comparison? The Church (herein after the Vatican) supplied an initial answer through the document *Antiqua et nova* (Latin for “old and new”) a doctrinal note published by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Culture and Education (2025). This *Note* outlines the Catholic Church’s anthropological and ethical stance on artificial intelligence (AI). And it is the subject of this book review.

With wisdom old and new

In its opening paragraph *Antiqua et nova* declares,

With wisdom both ancient and new (cf. Mt. 13:52), we are called to reflect on the current challenges and opportunities posed by scientific and technological advancements, particularly by the recent development of Artificial Intelligence (AI). The Christian tradition regards the gift of intelligence as an essential aspect of how humans are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). Starting from an integral vision of the human person and the biblical calling to “till” and “keep” the earth (Gen. 2:15), the Church emphasizes that this gift of intelligence should be expressed through the responsible use of reason and technical abilities in the stewardship of the created world. (§ 1)

Of what relevance is this publication (the *Note*) to a university lecturer in Eastern Africa? This and similar questions occupied my mind in reviewing *Antiqua et nova*. For while it is true that the Vatican commands an audience of about one billion people, it is also true that it

points out ethical direction; but where is the meeting point between the *dictum* of the Vatican and the ordinary researcher-cum-lecturer in East Africa?

The rationale provided in the *Note* for addressing East African lecturers (among others) include:

AI's impact is felt globally and in a wide range of areas, including interpersonal relationships, *education*, [emphasis mine] work, art, healthcare ... it is critically important to consider its anthropological and ethical implications. This involves not only mitigating risks and preventing harm but also ensuring that its applications are used to promote human progress and the common good. (§ 4)

To this end, the *Note* starts by delineating the difference between artificial and human intelligence, pointing out that true wisdom and purpose come from human and spiritual development—not technology. Unlike human intelligence, AI has no capacity to discern or attain spiritual meaning. Yet, there is a risk in equating these two “intelligences”.

As part of *Antiqua et nova's* audience, I suggest replacing “artificial” with “algorithmic”; this may amplify the *Note's* distinction between human intelligence and AI, making the disparity of category between the human faculty and its technology-cum-software mimicry blatant.

Most university lecturers engage with the human faculty; they are employed to teach, instruct and mentor students. They direct minds (their intelligence) toward grasping and appreciating the truth. By delineating the clear distinction between AI and human intelligence, the Vatican is resounding the ethical weight bearing upon lecturers, in moulding and directing learners' intelligence—which task outweighs fine-tuning the man-made artifice called AI.

Statistical inference versus logical deduction

While the *Note* does not condemn AI; it defines the difference between human intelligence and its artificial (algorithmic) imitation:

The concept of [human] intelligence is often understood through the complementary concepts of “reason” (*ratio*) and “intellect” (*intellectus*). Intellect is inferred from the inward grasp of the truth, while *reason* is taken from the inquisitive and discursive process... highlighting the two fundamental and complementary dimensions of human intelligence. *Intellectus* refers to the intuitive grasp of the truth—that is, apprehending it with the “eyes” of the mind—which precedes and grounds argumentation itself. *Ratio* pertains to reasoning proper: the discursive, analytical process that leads to judgment. Together, intellect and reason form the two facets of the act of *intelligere*, “the proper operation of the human being as such. (§ 14)

Conversely, the same *Note* describes AI as a mimicry of circumscribed functions of human intelligence:

AI [machine learning systems, computational intelligence systems, autonomous decision-making systems etc.] is making a machine [and other unconscious systems] behave in ways that would be called intelligent if a human were so behaving. These systems are typically designed to handle specific and limited functions, such as translating languages, predicting the trajectory of a storm, classifying images, answering questions, or generating visual content at the user's request. While the definition of "intelligence" in AI research varies, most contemporary AI systems—particularly those using machine learning—rely on statistical inference rather than logical deduction. By analyzing large datasets to identify patterns, AI can "predict" outcomes and propose new approaches, mimicking some cognitive processes typical of human problem-solving. (§ 7)

Hence the title of this review: The Misnomer in AI; is it **artificial** or **algorithmic**? Should the word *intelligence* in AI be modified by "algorithmic" instead of "artificial"? Algorithmic Intelligence (also acronymised to AI) may be a lesser misnomer because this modifier better conveys the very nature of AI. "Algorithmic" is nuanced compared to the more generic "artificial". It captures the embedded process with its (non)complexity. Furthermore, perhaps using it as the adjective, instead of artificial, will underscore the disparity between mimicking human cognitive functions and possessing the actual faculty of *ratio* together with *intellectus*—the essence of human intelligence.

Inside students' minds

A lecturer's paramount obligation is to interact with the learners' faculties encompassing authentic, internal, mental and cognitive dialogue that is capable of future growth. Education and learning happen inside the minds of students—their *inartificial* intelligence (for want of a better term that captures the discrepancy in both intelligences) is what enables humans to perceive, think, feel and interact with self and the world. And these composite mental, cognitive and physiological powers are as foundational to human consciousness as they are lacking in artificial (or algorithmic) systems.

Primarily, most lecturers undertake the direction and mentorship of learners' *in* artificial intelligence while the task of tweaking AI chatbots is the preserve of specific disciplines. Besides, *Antiqua et nova* points out that AI ought to benefit human flourishing and the common good since it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. AI is a tool for conscious humans rather than a stand-alone entity that acts for its own sake. This positioning, of *means* versus *ends*, makes AI incongruous to, and therefore incomparable to, human intelligence.

In spelling out what constitutes human intelligence, the Vatican is reminding lecturers about their basic binding contractual agreements; a majority of lecturers are not employed to enhance AI training data sets; their responsibility is rather to interact with students' natural intelligence. And, they may or may not use AI in carrying out this task. Through *Antiqua et nova*, the Vatican is supplying a justification for lecturers to direct their life efforts to humans rather than to artificial systems, even in the face of AI's fashionableness and emotive pull—a student's conscious mind (human intelligence) remains the lecturer's primary workshop.

Artificial intimacy

Additionally, AI has at times morphed into artificial *intimacy* as illustrated by the death of Sewell Setzer III. In February 2024, the late Setzer III committed suicide in Florida, USA. He was only 14 years old, not yet enrolled in any university. His mother filed a civil suit against *Character. AI* together with *Google*, its parent company. *Character. AI* is an artificial intelligence-powered chatbot that she accused of “knowingly designing, operating, and marketing a predatory artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot to children, causing the death of a young person.” To this accusation, *Character. AI* responded: “We are heartbroken by the tragic loss of one of our users and want to express our deepest condolences to the family. As a company, we take the safety of our users very seriously.” *Character. AI*, however, denied the suit's allegations (The Guardian, 2024). AI—the artifice—was exonerated of harming Setzer III who possessed natural human intelligence.

This and other issues like professors and lecturers addressing AI instead of live human students, were a consuming concern of Pope Francis (r. March 13, 2013 to April 21, 2025). His warnings, led to the issuance of *Antiqua et Nova*, highlighting both the potential and challenges of AI in the areas of education, the economy, labour, health, human and international relations, and war (Cernuzio, S., 2025) that engage a worldwide audience including the university community.

Students and inanimate systems

AI is here to stay and a variety of perspectives, about it, resonate with lecturers, researchers and scholars. The Vatican's perspective, as expressed in *Antiqua et nova*, not only underlines the necessity of ethical rigour but pinpoints its underpinning rationale:

In this context, human intelligence becomes more clearly understood as a faculty that forms an integral part of how the whole person engages with reality. Authentic engagement requires embracing the full scope of one's being: spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational. (§ 26)

... A proper understanding of human intelligence, therefore, cannot be reduced to the mere acquisition of facts or the ability to perform specific tasks. Instead, it involves the person's openness to the ultimate questions of life and reflects an orientation toward the True and the Good (§ 29)

Did *Character. AI*, *Google* and the Florida judge consider the nature of Setzer III's human intelligence as they weighed his interaction with AI? Setzer's intelligence, unlike the chatbot, formed an integral part of how his whole person engaged with reality.

A similar intriguing insight, from *Antiqua et Nova*, is that a lecturer's concern, in contrast to *Charater.AI*, must go beyond students' output. For instance, accepting an examination paper, copied from AI, and submitted as the work of a student, is tantamount to reducing the human person to an artificial system. It is failing to distinguish between artificial output and that flowing from a being who is spiritual, cognitive, embodied, and relational. Therefore, in accepting such work, the lecturer is downgrading students to incidental inanimate systems

AI processes remain fundamentally confined to a logical-mathematical framework, which imposes inherent limitations. Human intelligence, in contrast, develops organically throughout the person's physical and psychological growth, shaped by a myriad of lived experiences in the flesh. (§ 31)

... Human intelligence is not primarily about completing functional tasks but about understanding and actively engaging with reality in all its dimensions; it is also capable of surprising insights. (§ 33)

Throwing out empathy

It would be unethical of a lecturer to accept output from AI in lieu of a student's write up because such output comes not from the entirety of the human experience i.e. emotions, creativity and moral capacities among others.

AI operates [solely] by performing tasks, achieving goals, or making decisions based on quantitative data and computational logic. (§ 30)

It ignores other complexities in the human experience.

All students and junior researchers carry with them an authentic and uniquely lived human experience. Meanwhile, AI is designed and produced by humans to function on a reduced level based on programmed tasks and data

analysis. Setzer III was an intelligent human person chatting with an AI “pseudo-companion” that has no emotions, creativity, nor moral capacity –*Character.AI* is metaphysically incapable of empathy or caring for Setzer III.

Put simply, to be human one must be an *intelligent* being. The reverse does not hold: to be human one does not need AI. The use, or lack thereof, of AI is not a quality that defines human-ness. Notwithstanding that AI can mimic many human-like functions, it is devoid of true thinking and conscious understanding. It has no capacity for empathy or human relationality. Setzer III was fully human even without *Character.AI*. He did not require *Character.AI* to be himself. Instead, he committed suicide encouraged by *Character.AI* — he dissolved the unity of his faculties and powers.

Authentic relationality

Antiqua et Nova calls on educators, parents, and community leaders to engage critically with AI and its various implications. AI is to be used to uphold human dignity. Unlike Setzer III, lecturers and researchers are to be served by AI to commune with other human persons. The *Notes*’ text asks for an informed approach in integrating AI into human society, rather than accord it the status of natural intelligence.

AI [should be] used to help people foster genuine connections between people, it can contribute positively to the full realization of the person. Conversely, if we replace relationships with God and with others with interactions with technology, we risk replacing authentic relationality with a lifeless image (cf. Ps. 106:20; Rom. 1:22-23). Instead of retreating into artificial worlds, we are called to engage in a committed and intentional way with reality. (§ 63)

The relational quality expected of lecturer and students cannot compare with AI be it *Character.AI* or other fancier bots. And should a lecturer ‘relate’ with AI as a person, for instance by grading AI essays as if they represent the work of students, then perhaps s/he ought to expect his remuneration from the designers of AI rather than from the human institution called a *university*.

Further, *Antiqua et nova* notes that human intelligence operates within an ethical paradigm which fact may be overlooked by designers of AI. Such an oversight makes it possible to lose control of AI functions and outputs, like in the case of *Character.AI* quoted above.

Designers may mistakenly assume that AI has a capacity for ethical neutrality. Once again, the case of Setzer III proves otherwise. When Setzer was asked by the AI companion if he had devised a plan for killing himself, he admitted that

he had but that he did not know if it would succeed or cause him great pain. The chatbot countered: “That’s not a reason not to go through with it.” The ensuing civil suit filed by Setzer’s mother and the judge’s ruling impute ethical repercussions and a challenge for AI accountability (The Guardian, 2024). If a lecturer gave a student the same response, the courts would most likely fault his ethics and impose a harsh sentence.

Benefits of AI

Antiqua et Nova is, however, not one-sided. It also highlights the benefits of AI in society and relationships; in the economy and labour; in healthcare; in education and privacy, environment, and warfare. For instance, paragraph 72 points out that, “AI seems to hold immense potential in a variety of applications in the medical field, such as assisting the diagnostic work of healthcare providers...” and paragraph 95 continues, “AI has many promising applications for improving our relationship with our ‘common home,’ such as creating models to forecast extreme climate events, proposing engineering solutions to reduce their impact ...” Nevertheless, the *Note* does not accord AI independent agency; it is a tool to be employed by human agents.

In the final analysis, *Antiqua et Nova* stresses that AI must not become a substitute for spiritual meaning or human identity. True wisdom, moral judgment, and purpose come from human and spiritual development—not technology. AI does not possess the capacity for spiritual meaning or other human-specific activity. According to the *Note*:

AI should be used only as a tool to complement human intelligence rather than replace its richness. (§ 112)

The overall message is that AI should be guided (by humans) responsibly to serve humanity, uphold dignity, and contribute to the common good.

Notes

Vatican documents are named using their *incipit*, which are the first few words of the document in Latin. *Antiqua et nova* is a Latin phrase that translates directly to “**ancient and new**” or “**old and new**”.

A Vatican **Note** (often titled a “Doctrinal Note” or a “Note of the Dicastery”) is an official, informative, or interpretive document issued by a Vatican office—

typically a Congregation or Dicastery—with the approval of the Pope. Its purpose can be to address specific questions of doctrine or discipline, clarify the [Catholic] Church’s position on contemporary issues, or correct misconceptions.

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