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Personhood and artificial intelligence: An Orthodox theological perspective

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of personhood in relation to the ethical and anthropological challenges raised by Artificial Intelligence (AI) from the standpoint of Orthodox Christian theology. While contemporary debates often approach personhood through cognitive, psychological, or functional criteria, Orthodox theology understands the human person as a unique and unrepeatable being created in the image of God, whose existence is defined by freedom, love, and communion. The study argues that AI, however sophisticated, lacks ontological depth, relational capacity, and moral self-determination—features that belong exclusively to the human person. Drawing on the Patristic tradition, Trinitarian theology, and modern philosophical insights, it emphasizes that personhood is not reducible to biological or computational individuality but is realized through relational and eucharistic existence. The growing personification of machines, coupled with the mechanization of human life, threatens to erode authentic interpersonal relationships and diminish human dignity. In response, Orthodox anthropology offers an alternative paradigm in which technological innovation must remain subordinate to ethical and spiritual principles that safeguard the integrity of human identity. Only through such an approach can technology serve as an instrument of freedom and transformation rather than alienation and control.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, personhood, orthodox Christian theology

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Introduction: The anthropological question in the age of artificial intelligence

The rapid emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has redefined many dimensions of human existence, from communication and knowledge to creativity and moral decision-making. Yet behind every technological advance lies a deeper anthropological question: *what does it mean to be a person?* The contemporary fascination with intelligent machines and the growing discourse on "artificial persons" reveal not merely technical progress but a profound anxiety about the nature and future of humanity itself.

From the standpoint of Christian theology—and particularly within the Orthodox tradition—the human being cannot be reduced to a biological, psychological, or cognitive entity. The human person (*πρόσωπο*) is understood as a living being created in the image and likeness of God, called to freedom, communion, and love. This theological vision stands in sharp contrast to contemporary anthropologies that interpret personhood through the lens of autonomy, rationality, or self-awareness.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the Orthodox understanding of personhood can illuminate the ethical and anthropological challenges raised by AI. It will argue that while technology can extend human capacities, it cannot replicate the ontological depth of personal existence. Drawing on the Patristic tradition, Trinitarian theology, and modern philosophical insights, the paper proposes that genuine personhood transcends functionality and consciousness: it is a mode of being grounded in relationality and communion.

Methodologically, this reflection proceeds at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and bioethics. It interprets AI not simply as a technological phenomenon but as a mirror of human self-understanding. In doing so, it seeks to show that the Orthodox theological vision of personhood offers a corrective and transformative perspective—one that restores the primacy of freedom, love, and dignity in an age increasingly shaped by algorithms and machines.

The concept of personhood in orthodox theology

Within Orthodox theology, the concept of personhood (*πρόσωπο*) occupies a central position in both anthropology and Trinitarian theology. The person is not a psychological construct or social label but an ontological reality—a unique mode of existence that manifests freedom and relationality. Patristic thought identifies the human person as a being created in the *image of God* (*imago Dei*), called to reflect divine communion within the created world.

A fundamental distinction underlies this conception: that between *essence* (*ουσία*) and *hypostasis*. St. Basil the Great clearly differentiates between the divine essence, which is beyond comprehension and participation, and the hypostasis, which designates the concrete, personal mode of existence of each Divine Person. This distinction grants ontological depth to personhood, revealing it as a reality irreducible to its nature. To exist as a person means to exist in relation—to affirm oneself through communion rather than isolation (Yarmenitis, 2020).

In this sense, the human person is not a self-contained individual but a being whose identity is realized through freedom and openness to the other. Freedom, as understood in Orthodox anthropology, is not mere autonomy or self-determination, but the capacity to love and to transcend necessity. Through this freedom, humanity is able to relate creation and technology to God, offering them eucharistically back to the Creator (Kolipetsas, 2021).

The Patristic tradition links this understanding of personhood directly with the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct hypostases who exist in eternal communion and love. Their unity is not one of substance alone but of relational being. Consequently, human beings, made in the image of the Triune God, are called to realize their personhood not in isolation but in communion—with God, with other persons, and with creation itself (Yarmenitis, 2020).

Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon famously remarked that ancient Greek philosophy remained "a-personal in its essence," unable to integrate individuality with communion (Zizioulas, 1977). The Christian revelation, by contrast, introduced a radical ontology

of relationship, according to which being itself is communion. This theological shift transformed anthropology: the human being is not defined by reason alone, as Aristotle proposed, but by the capacity for relational existence. As Zizioulas and other theologians emphasize, personhood emerges through the act of free self-giving, mirroring the Trinitarian mode of being.

In light of this vision, personhood cannot be equated with consciousness, intelligence, or functionality—all of which may be mimicked by machines. The essence of personhood lies in its *hypostatic uniqueness*: the irreducible identity of a being capable of love, communion, and transcendence. Artificial intelligence, no matter how advanced, operates within deterministic parameters. It lacks both the ontological freedom and the relational intentionality that characterize the human person.

Orthodox anthropology thus conceives personhood as dynamic, relational, and eschatological. It is dynamic because the person is not a static essence but a being-in-becoming, continuously shaped through relationship with God and others. It is relational because existence itself is defined through communion. And it is eschatological because the fullness of personhood is realized only in union with God—in the theosis of humanity that the Church proclaims as the ultimate destiny of creation.

From this standpoint, technology and AI must be situated within a broader theological anthropology. They may extend human capacities and reveal the creative potential of the human mind, yet they cannot generate true personhood. To do so would require the presence of freedom and love—the marks of divine image in humanity. In the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, "It is not reason that makes us in God's image, but the capacity for communion." This insight remains decisive as we confront the anthropological and ethical dilemmas of the digital age.

Philosophical perspectives on personhood and artificial intelligence

The philosophical discourse on personhood has long grappled with the tension between individuality and universality, autono-

my and dependence, rationality and relation. In modern philosophy, particularly since Immanuel Kant, personhood has been associated with dignity and moral autonomy. Kant defined the person as a rational being who must always be treated as an end and never merely as a means (Dragona-Monachou, 2016). This moral imperative marked a decisive turn from ontological to ethical personalism, locating the foundation of personhood in moral agency.

Yet the Kantian understanding of autonomy, though revolutionary, remains bound to an abstract rationalism. It privileges cognitive independence over relationality and risks reducing personhood to moral function rather than ontological communion. Later philosophical developments—especially in phenomenology and existentialism—sought to restore the interpersonal and embodied dimensions of human existence. Thinkers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gabriel Marcel reintroduced the language of encounter, dialogue, and transcendence, emphasizing the *I–Thou* relationship as constitutive of personhood.

In the contemporary field of philosophy of technology, similar concerns have resurfaced in debates on artificial intelligence. Scholars like Mark Coeckelbergh (2020) and Shannon Vallor (2016) have argued that technological mediation profoundly reshapes moral perception and human identity. For Coeckelbergh, our ethical relation to robots and intelligent systems depends less on their intrinsic properties than on the social contexts in which we interact with them. Floridi (2013), by contrast, frames the problem within his "infosphere" ontology, where informational entities—including AI—acquire a form of moral relevance.

Despite their insights, these approaches remain phenomenological or ethical rather than ontological. They describe how humans *relate* to machines, not whether machines can *be* persons in the full existential sense. From an Orthodox theological perspective, this distinction is crucial. Personhood is not a function of perception or behavior but an ontological mode of being grounded in communion. No matter how advanced an AI system may become, it operates within a network of algorithmic causality, devoid of interiority, moral freedom, or relational intentionality.

Metropolitan John Zizioulas' critique of ancient philosophy applies equally well to modern technocentric thought: it remains "a-personal in its essence." The project of artificial personhood exemplifies the same metaphysical limitation—the inability to reconcile individuality with communion. Orthodox theology, by contrast, envisions a synthesis where freedom and relation coexist without contradiction. This vision resists both reductionism and determinism, affirming that to be a person is to exist as a gift, not as a program.

The dialogue between theology and philosophy thus becomes indispensable. Philosophy contributes analytical clarity, while theology restores the metaphysical and relational depth that modern thought has often lost. Only through such dialogue can the question of AI and personhood transcend the technical and regain its full anthropological and ethical significance.

The challenge of artificial intelligence

The rise of artificial intelligence poses one of the most profound anthropological challenges of the modern era. Contemporary societies, fascinated by the capacity of machines to imitate human thought and creativity, are increasingly tempted to attribute person-like qualities to technological artifacts. The "personification" of machines coincides with the "mechanization" of human beings, as individuals grow accustomed to perceiving themselves and others through the logic of efficiency, productivity, and data.

Within this context, the danger lies not in technology itself but in its anthropological implications. The human being risks losing its identity, reduced to a mechanized existence detached from its spiritual essence. The proliferation of AI-driven systems—from virtual assistants to humanoid robots—encourages a subtle inversion: what is human becomes mechanical, and what is mechanical appears human. This process threatens to erode authentic interpersonal relationships, replacing them with artificially simulated forms of communication and emotion (Samartzis, 2024).

Theologically, this development represents a crisis of meaning. Created in the divine image, the human person is called to transform matter through creative freedom, not to surrender freedom

to material mechanisms. When technology is divorced from ethical and spiritual principles, it becomes an instrument of alienation rather than communion. As Archbishop Makarios Griniezakis (2024) observed at the International Theological Conference *Orthodox Theology in the 21st Century*, the human being has received from God "the unique privilege of being created in His image and endowed with the potential of likeness." This vocation entails moral responsibility: humanity must cooperate with divine grace in the continual vindication and sanctification of the person—that is, in the process of *theosis*.

The fear that machines might one day surpass or even replace human beings is not unfounded. Prominent thinkers such as Stephen Hawking (2015) and Yuval Noah Harari have warned that unchecked technological development could undermine democracy and human freedom. Neil McArthur (2024) has even speculated that devotion to artificial intelligence could evolve into a quasi-religious phenomenon, complete with rituals and moral codes. Such predictions, though speculative, reveal a collective anxiety about the displacement of human uniqueness.

From the Orthodox perspective, this anxiety stems from a misapprehension of what personhood truly is. Artificial intelligence can simulate intelligence but not consciousness; it can process language but not meaning; it can replicate behavior but not love. Its operations lack hypostatic being—there is no "who" behind its actions. The human person, by contrast, is defined precisely by this "who": a free, unrepeatable center of relational existence.

Moreover, the misuse of AI threatens to transform freedom into dependence. The convenience of algorithmic mediation may lead to moral passivity and social control. Technologies designed to serve human needs can subtly reshape those very needs, generating artificial desires and dependencies. As Kornarakis (2025) warns, when technology is divorced from ethical restraint and spiritual discernment, it becomes a mechanism of oppression rather than liberation.

The challenge, therefore, is not merely technical but spiritual. Humanity must discern how to employ technology without losing sight of the personal dimension that defines its own being. This

requires a renewed anthropology—one that recognizes that true progress is measured not by computational power but by the depth of communion and love it fosters.

In this regard, Orthodox theology offers a critical yet hopeful stance. It neither rejects technological innovation nor idealizes it. Rather, it calls for a transformative engagement: technology must be integrated into a moral and spiritual horizon that affirms the primacy of personhood. Only when guided by the principles of freedom, dignity, and communion can AI become a tool of service rather than domination, a means of transformation rather than alienation.

Freedom, love, and communion: The ontological core of personhood

At the heart of Orthodox anthropology lies the conviction that freedom is inseparable from love and communion. Freedom does not signify the autonomous assertion of the self but the capacity to transcend oneself in relationship with God and others. It is the power to offer oneself, to transform necessity into gift. As metropolitan John Zizioulas insists, "being is communion"; to exist as a person means to exist ecstatically, beyond self-enclosure, in an act of relational freedom (Zizioulas, 1977).

This theological vision contrasts sharply with the technocratic conception of freedom as limitless choice or control. In technological culture, freedom is often understood as the removal of constraints through innovation, optimization, and efficiency. Yet such freedom, detached from moral orientation, risks devolving into a form of enslavement—an addiction to the very systems that promise liberation. True freedom, according to Orthodox theology, is rooted in love: a freedom that discovers its fulfillment not in autonomy but in communion.

Love (*αγάπη*) constitutes the ontological foundation of personal existence. It is not an emotion or sentiment but a mode of being, the very energy through which the person becomes itself. As the human being participates in divine love, it becomes capable of transforming matter and history, transfiguring the world into a Eucharistic offering. In this sense, technological creativity is not condemned; it is part of

the human vocation to co-create with God. The danger arises only when creativity is severed from communion, when human intelligence seeks to rival rather than reflect the divine Logos.

The human person, created as *imago Dei*, mirrors the Trinitarian structure of existence: unity in diversity, freedom in relation, being-in-communion. Artificial intelligence, however, lacks this ontological capacity. It can simulate choices, but not freedom; it can calculate outcomes, but not love; it can analyze relationships, but not *enter* into them. Its apparent autonomy is derivative—a reflection of human programming and intention.

In this light, AI serves as a mirror in which humanity confronts its own spiritual condition. If we construct machines that imitate personhood without possessing it, we risk losing sight of what makes us persons in the first place. The challenge is therefore not only technological but profoundly anthropological and spiritual: to rediscover freedom as love, and love as the essence of being.

The eschatological horizon of Orthodox theology illuminates this dynamic. Personhood is not static but unfolds toward fulfillment in God. The ultimate destiny of humanity is *theosis*—the transformation of human existence through participation in divine life. Within this perspective, every act of freedom, love, and creativity participates, however imperfectly, in that final communion. Technology, when rightly oriented, can serve this process by enabling forms of communication, healing, and cooperation that express human solidarity. But when divorced from the spirit of love, it becomes an idol that reflects humanity's own alienation rather than its divine calling.

Toward an orthodox ethic of technology

Orthodox theology does not approach technology with suspicion or hostility, but with discernment. It recognizes in technological creativity the reflection of the divine image—the human capacity to shape, name, and transform creation. Yet this power must be exercised eucharistically: as thanksgiving, service, and stewardship. The ethical challenge of AI, therefore, is not whether machines can think, but whether humanity can remain faithful to its vocation as co-creator and caretaker of the world.

A truly Orthodox ethic of technology begins with the affirmation of human dignity. The person must never be subordinated to efficiency, profit, or technological necessity. Ethical principles governing AI should thus reflect the theological anthropology that understands each human being as a unique and unrepeatable hypostasis, called to communion. This requires policies and practices that safeguard privacy, autonomy, and justice, but also cultivate virtues of humility, compassion, and spiritual discernment.

Secondly, technology must remain subordinate to love and relationality. Every innovation should be evaluated in light of its impact on human communion: does it deepen our capacity to love and to know one another, or does it isolate and fragment? The answer to this question determines whether technology serves the human person or undermines it. As Kolipetsas (2021) observes, technological progress without ethical orientation risks becoming self-destructive, for it amplifies human power without sanctifying its purpose.

Thirdly, the dialogue between theology, science, and philosophy must be strengthened. As Tsinorema (2016) notes, bioethics cannot be confined to legal regulation; it requires an anthropological foundation. Interdisciplinary cooperation allows technology to be guided by an integral vision of the human being—one that includes not only rational and biological dimensions but spiritual and relational ones.

Finally, an Orthodox ethic of technology is eschatological. It perceives every human endeavor within the horizon of the Kingdom of God, where creation will be renewed and human communion perfected. The goal is not to reject the world but to transfigure it, to orient technological creativity toward the service of life and the glorification of God. As the First Bioethics Conference of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Griniezakis, 2024) affirmed, the human being is called "to strive, in cooperation with God, for the eternal vindication of the person." This vindication becomes the criterion by which every form of progress must be judged.

Conclusion

The question of personhood in the age of artificial intelligence is ultimately a question about humanity's own self-understanding.

As technology advances, we are confronted not merely with new tools but with new mirrors—reflections of our desires, fears, and aspirations. Artificial intelligence, despite its remarkable achievements, cannot cross the ontological threshold that separates mechanism from personhood. It lacks hypostasis, freedom, and love.

Orthodox theology reminds us that the human person is not defined by intelligence alone but by the capacity for communion. To exist as a person is to exist in relation—to God, to others, and to the world. This relational ontology provides a profound corrective to technocratic paradigms that equate being with function and knowledge with control. It calls humanity to a renewed vision of progress: one that measures advancement not by computational speed or data volume, but by the deepening of interpersonal and divine communion.

In this vision, technology is not rejected but redeemed. When subordinated to ethical and spiritual principles, it can become an instrument of liberation, healing, and transformation. But when divorced from love and freedom, it turns into an idol that enslaves its maker. The decisive distinction between human and machine thus lies not in intelligence but in love—not in calculation but in communion.

Ultimately, the challenge of artificial intelligence invites humanity to rediscover its own vocation as image and likeness of God. The future of civilization depends on whether we use our creative power eucharistically, as co-workers with divine grace, or destructively, as architects of our own alienation. The Orthodox theological vision of personhood offers hope in this discernment: that even in an age of machines, the mystery of the human person remains the most radiant reflection of the divine.

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