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Artificial intelligence and the right to die: A virtual eternity

Abstract

The concept of "digital immortality" is approached through a combination of realism and philosophical reflection, with the aim of demystifying the functioning of artificial intelligence, attributing to it realistic dimensions based on two fundamental parameters: storage capacity and the incomprehensible functioning of the "black box". The episode *San Junipero* from the series *Black Mirror* is used as a narrative starting point to explore the prospect of a future, digitally extended existence, while applications such as Replika, Storyworth, HereAfter, Forever Missed and Deadsocial are already contemporary attempts to preserve human presence after death. The need to explore both the philosophical question of human identity and the theological the concept of the person as a complete separate entity, which in its relationship with God is not affected by the limits of physical death, but already has the potential for immortality.
Keywords: Digital immortality, black mirror, artificial intelligence, replika, deadsocial, identity, person

Artificial intelligence and technological realism

Death and Artificial Intelligence are not concepts that go hand in hand. Death signifies the end of existential consciousness, beyond the termination of bodily function. Artificial intelligence does not yet possess either of these two things: neither consciousness nor a perishable body with a natural expiration date.

As we approach the end of 2025, the development of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) system has exceeded all expectations. Tools that produce images, sound and text, such as the now well-known ChatGPT, are widely used. Any hesitation about using them has been pretty much overcome, and companies are now using it on a

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personalised level for better results. The current state of AI systems can automate repetitive tasks, autonomously manage areas such as customer service, marketing, and even various creative projects depending on requirements, analyse data and make predictions with the corresponding data, and of course chatbots and ChatGPT, which are language models and have evolved the most.

However, the way artificial intelligence works is not magical, and therefore there are many obstacles and difficulties, even in this period of tremendous development. There are two main problems facing the artificial intelligence system: storage capacity and explaining the choices it makes. AI is currently unable to adequately explain its various choices, nor can it analyse why it does not make certain others. This issue is called the Black Box Problem (Bathaee, 2018). The name comes from the black box used in aeroplanes and highlights the following issue: in AI, we can certainly know the input data and, of course, the output, i.e. the result it gives us. However, often even the manufacturers cannot know the process that takes place in between to give us the specific result or choice with this data (Michel, 2020).

The cloud is the modern way of storing data. The digital repository of the world may sound like something endless with an unknown location, but it is actually a specific space-time with a location and limited capacity. The cloud is hosted in warehouses, also known as data centres, which house servers and hard drives (Hoga, 2023) and constitute the dominant infrastructure for the storage, processing and management of digital data for many areas of our daily lives: the economy, health, government, education and entertainment. In the past, digital information was stored either on large-capacity physical hard drives or on local servers. Now, data is even stored in a different country from the user, is instantly accessible via the internet, and has no expiry date or risk of being lost due to natural disasters (Duenas, 2018).

However, nothing comes without problems and consequences. This infrastructure requires a significant amount of non-renewable energy, as well as large quantities of water to maintain the correct cold temperature (Holt & Vonderau, 2015). Furthermore, carbon di-

oxide emissions from the processes and the necessary replacement of natural materials that have aged and no longer perform as well or have broken down create a significant amount of electronic waste that further burdens the environment (Miller, 2015). The reality behind the elusive "cloud" certainly breaks the narrative of green technology but also confirms that the memory of all humanity cannot fit there.

Artificial intelligence and imagination: Future proposals?

This is the realistic side of artificial intelligence today, and with this guide, we can understand why continuity is a scenario that is both distant and close. Death and artificial intelligence may not be concepts that go hand in hand, but modern technological development has managed to open a back door that leads to a form of digital immortality. There are already laboratories, such as Altos Lab, which are studying and searching for ways to defeat the ageing of the body in order to combat "bad genes" and thus delay death.

To enhance critical thinking and highlight theoretical concerns about digital immortality, there is no more fertile ground than the science fiction series "Black Mirror". This series deals with Artificial Intelligence and its (possible) future applications, while raising both ethical and practical questions, presenting scenarios that still belong to the realm of fantasy but, due to the steady advancement of technology, are not logically impossible.

In an episode called "San Junipero" (Brooker, 2016), a hypothetical scenario is presented in which human consciousness can "ascend" to a digital space after physical death and "live" there forever. The story takes place in a virtual reality that is somewhat reminiscent of a video game, as you can choose what era you want to live in, what you will wear, how old you will be and, of course, what you will do. It is a 'life support' medical device that allows sick, elderly and paralysed people to live like normal, healthy and young people. They can also choose to stay in this device forever, in an eternal virtual reality, and never die.

Our two protagonists meet in digital reality and fall in love. As their real lives are revealed, we learn that one has been paralysed

since a young age and is close to death, while the other is elderly and hesitant to decide to stay in the digital world forever. The former has never lived because of his paralysis, while the latter has lived a long and full life and death is not such a bad idea for him to rest.

The screenwriter gives a happy ending, with the protagonists living their love in eternity inside this device. In essence, they have 'uploaded' their brain functions to the system and from then on will live forever in the virtual world as immortal, healthy, digital young people.

Of course, it would be impossible to explain in a one-hour episode what exactly "uploading brain functions digitally" means. Is it a person's personality that is "uploaded"? Their character? Their personal identity? The series cannot explain something that even science has not yet precisely defined.

Modern Applications of AI

In 2020, a company in South Korea made a documentary using Virtual Reality (VR) technology to bring a mother and daughter back together. The little girl had passed away at the age of seven, and her mother, through the VR experience, was able to "talk to her again" and "see" her. She said that although she could feel the differences from her real daughter, this encounter satisfied her need to say a final goodbye to her daughter, which she had not been able to do in reality (Gyu-lee, 2020).

In 2022, Marina Smith spoke to those attending her funeral for the last time through a video with AI (Gyu-lee, 2020). Before she died, Smith had undergone an extensive interview, answering as many questions as possible. The video was shown at her funeral, and her family and friends were able to have a final farewell conversation with her.

There are apps such as HereAfter, Replika, StoryWorth and Forever Missed that use Artificial Intelligence to store and reproduce memories, thoughts, images, sound and speech. They use data from people's accounts and posts to create a digital avatar that thinks and speaks like the person it is copying. With the help of photos and

recordings, the technology creates a realistic replica of yourself, offering a new way to preserve your personal history.

Another well-known application, DeadSocial, was created as a guide to help people manage their funeral before they leave this earthly reality. It has clear instructions on how to manage one's digital footprints: from accounts on digital social networks to one's will. On its website, it advertises the "product" as follows: "*No one knows when their life will end, so it is important to prepare for death both physically and digitally so that we are ready when the time comes.*" It psychologically targets the unknown that everyone fears: if you die suddenly, what will happen to your loved ones, who will manage your digital world?

There are also many applications that do not focus so much on managing the digital situation after death, but on creating avatars or chatbots with voice simulations and indicative responses from the future deceased, so that when they die, their loved ones can "talk" to them and find comfort.

Human identity, soul and digital afterlife

But what happens when a person finally passes away? The person is gone, but their avatar remains. It will remain forever stored in the world's digital repository. Their loved ones, in order to manage their grief, will be able to interact with them, hear their voice over and over again, have conversations with them, as if they were there. But their loved one is not there. Who, then, are relatives and friends talking to? Who are they mourning with? Who was the deceased to be so well imitated by an artificial intelligence system? Did his existence have meaning before his avatar? Does his avatar have meaning after his death?

The ancient mystery of personal identity, therefore, emerges once again. If we have a personal identity, how is it defined, and if we do not, then who are we and who will be those who live as our avatars? What, then, is a human being? Can this question define something so complex in just five rules that can be understood and implemented by a machine? Then, even if we limit human existence to a few words that will become algorithms, is it so easy to describe

each person's personal existence accurately in a software system and give us back someone, not as a replica, but as the real person?

The attempt to define the concept of man has preoccupied science, the arts and, of course, philosophy for centuries. Descartes limited human existence to the mental act of thinking, identifying the "I" with the mind (Descartes, 2010). Locke, on the other hand, could not ignore the existence of the body (which Descartes conveniently took for granted), and concluded that humans need both body and thought, along with memory and psychological continuity, in order to have an identity of self (Locke, 1999). Hume, being more flexible, considered that since we are not the same every day, there is no constant that can define us. He considers man to be a bundle of ideas and perceptions that is constantly changing (Hume, 2007). Kant approaches human existence through the relationship of the subject with knowledge, morality and freedom. That is, the ability of humans to know the world, to legislate morally for themselves and to act freely. He considers humans to be both cognitive subjects and moral persons (Kant, 2002). Finally, Parfit questioned the stability of the personal self and ultimately rejected the concept of personal identity. What matters for human existence is psychological continuity and the succession of conscious states (Parfit, 2011).

These philosophers approached human existence and identity using different criteria: thought, memory, consciousness, moral autonomy, and psychological continuity. Can all of these be replicated through Artificial Intelligence systems? Certainly, some human characteristics, such as logic, data processing and memory, have already been incorporated into these systems as properties, precisely because they perform better than humans. However, questions remain open and technologically uncertain regarding the ability of Artificial Intelligence to reproduce subjective experience, sense of self, or moral responsibility.

This is perhaps why scientists and philosophers, in order to imitate humans through robotics, are forced to re-examine human nature. They have to "break" the concept of existence into pieces so that they can reassemble it as a machine (Guizzo, 2010).

Christian thought adds another factor of difficulty to the pro-

cess of imitation. In Christian theology, humans are considered persons. Based on patristic thought, this means that each person is a separate being before God, who is "sealed" by his relationship with Him. The word "person" unites each distinct human being with its creator, thus forming an *unbreakable communion* based on God's love for His creation. This love is so powerful that it breaks man's bonds with all the earthly chains that pull him away from this loving relationship: despair, fear, guilt, death (Zizioulas, 2004).

Theologically speaking, death is not a punishment, but a gift that frees man from an endless wandering in the absurd contradictions of this world. It is an opportunity for mortal existence to be reborn into a peaceful eternity of 'being well' in communion with God, opening the door to the hereafter. What does it mean for a deceased person to have their avatar exist in digital eternity, for the repose of their soul? Do the memories created by their relatives with the avatar have any connection to the deceased? Are the words of this avatar the words of the deceased? Finally, when this technology reaches its mechanical evolution, i.e. the robot, the pinnacle of absolute immortality, what would be the meaning of the deceased's life? Was it to come into the world and live, or to come into the world and become an imitation? Digital immortality, even in its early stages, traps each person's personal existence in a data system, which will be there for eternity to remind us of someone who once existed.

"The meaning of life is that it once ends," says Kafka. There is no doubt that if someone finds a way to perfectly imitate human thought, personality and freedom and infuse them into a machine, they will do so. No one would refuse the elixir of immortality if it could be found. Science will always test the limits of nature, and philosophy will always be there to challenge the limits of applications and redefine anything that pretends to understand nature better than it does.

Death, therefore, as an independent event, is absurd and full of pain for all involved. Theology, however, is here to offer its own version of immortality and eternity. Death is a "door" to the absolute freedom of human existence from all forms of matter, freedom from

digital illusions, and leads to eternity. An eternity without back-up, big data, commitments or fear, without, in other words, the remnants of mortal experience. Because for theology, immortality and eternity cannot be understood without the vision of the last things, the eternal state of bliss in communion with the personal God. It is the last things that give meaning to the "depth" of these concepts. In this way, theology places the question of immortality and eternity in its ontological depth: not *how* to maintain a material existence, but why life exists and to whom *being* ultimately belongs.

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