IS THERE A TECHNOLOGICAL REASON FOR HOPE? TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIP IN THE AGE OF AI

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"Computers are useless.
They can only give you answers"
(Pablo Picasso)

Abstract:

In the age of AI and digital technology, hope has shifted from a religious or human-centered virtue to a form of technological optimism. The challenge for Social Doctrine of Church is to define the criteria for considering technology in the service of human flourishing, giving to society new reasons for hope. Drawing on thinkers like Heidegger, Anders, and Han, this contribution argues that technology changes not only our environment but our self-understanding. True hope, however, does not come from technology itself but from relationships, ethical responsibility, and human intentionality (Gabriel Marcel). With the analysis of Donati and the anthropological view of Plessner, hope emerges through the recognition of human fragility, relationality, and the limits of technology. While reducing reality to data and binary logic flattens the human dimension, genuine hope requires resisting the closure of technological determinism and recovering the human capacity for new beginnings, rooted in dignity, relationality, and social responsibility.

Keywords: AI and Anthropology, Social Doctrine of Church, Spirit of Hope, Human Dignity, Otherness and Relationship

1. *Technology and Hope*

To live in the technological age means to live in tension. On the one hand, technology offers unprecedented power, convenience, and connection. On the other, it brings with it profound existential crises – the erosion of meaning, the automation of life, the displacement of the human being. Therefore, the age of technology – the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" has made technology a crucial factor determining life and social conditions –

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has become an age characterized by the need for hope. Never before has humanity so intensely 'hoped' that technological development would unfold for its benefit[1]. For the dangers have become increasingly apparent (nuclear threat, but also universal transformation of every day's life in a technical realm), Günther Anders described these dangers as a result from the *Promethean gap*, the difference which has emerged between the technological performance and the effective possibilities of human nature. For Anders, this *gap* let the human being feel the *Promethean shame* which is not any more a moral feeling in the face of the destroying possibilities of technology but the feeling of not being coequal to technology[2]. Today, perhaps we don't feel any more this *shame* and therefore we don't perceive any more the *gap* which separates humanity from the technological promises. In this way, it has become realised what already Anders himself had described as the transhuman dimension of technology – even if not with the 'transhuman enthusiasm' of its contemporary versions: «In no other sense than the one in which Napoleon spoke of politics 150 years ago, and Marx of the economy 100 years ago, is technology now our fate. And even if it may no longer be possible for us to guide the hand of our fate, or even to watch its fingers move – we should not, for that reason, give up trying»[3].

But even Heidegger was already aware that the challenge of technology does not lie in the atomic bomb or any technical artifact, but in the way it transforms the human understanding of Being and of the self[4]: in other

[1] Bormann observes indeed that «the increasing penetration of our lifeworld by AI systems is becoming more and more positively perceived» (F.-J. Bormann, *Ist die praktische Vernunft des Menschen durch KI-Systeme ersetzbar? Zum unterschiedlichen Status von menschlichen Personen und (selbst)lernenden Maschinen*, in *Digitalisierung im Gesundheitswesen. Anthropologische und ethische Herausforderungen neuer Entwicklungen der Mensch-Maschine-Interaktion*, ed. by A. Fritz *et al.*, Herder, Freiburg 2021, pp. 41-64, here p. 42; all translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author: M.K.).

[2] «To regard these defendants [in the trials in which 'crimes against humanity' were prosecuted] simply as random specimens of dehumanized or hardened individuals would be utterly mistaken. If they were incapable of feeling remorse, shame, or any other kind of moral reaction, it was not despite their participation – but in most cases precisely because they had merely participated. In some instances, it was even because they *had* participated – meaning: for them, being 'moral' coincided entirely with being a fully integrated member of their social environment. And thus, as 'participants', they possessed a clear conscience» (G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, Beck, München 1961, p. 287).

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[4] The way in which happens this revealing of Being in the technological era is the *Enframing* («Gestell»). Through this process, the world and everything within it – nature,

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words, technological thinking transforms our entire attitude toward our self-understanding within reality, and therefore in general of 'existence'. Therefore, already in 1953, Heidegger had to take refuge in Hölderlin, concluding his essay on the essence of technology with reflections on his famous phrase: «But where danger is, grows / The saving power also»[5]. He asks, in other words, whether the very extremity of technological "enframing" might awaken a new openness to Being[6]. Will we ever be able to relate ourselves to Being and reality, to the others, in another but technical way? Will we anew be able to catch significance not by doing and producing but by listening? Hope, here, is not about technological progress but about *Gelassenheit* – a releasement, a letting-be, that allows for a different relation to the world. In this way, technology was elevated in the range of the future-forming force: not any more politics or the economy (at least if it is thought without technics), but technology is seen as the universal tool for finding 'hope', even if this is – as it will be shown – not more than mere 'optimism'. And while Heidegger reflected this dimensions, Pope Pius "hoped" that the ethical consciousness of Humans can avoid the dystopic consequences of technology: «It is therefore necessary to devise appropriate measures from now on, so that the dynamism of technology does not turn into a public calamity»[7]. The question is, which diverse anthropological presuppositions let Pope Pius XII pronounce this perspective of hope which is convinced that humanity can preserve its autonomous agency and

objects, even human beings – come to be seen primarily as resources, standing reserve (*Bestand*), ready to be used, controlled, optimized, and exploited for human ends. In this way, the objectivization of Being which always was the problem of metaphysics, came to its perfection; cfr. M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, in Id., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, transl. by W. Lovitt, Garland, New York-London 1977, pp. 3-35.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[6] Cfr. also the recent analysis of Donati: «digital devices are not mere tools but rather social forces that are increasingly affecting our self-conception (who we are), our mutual interactions (how we socialize), our conception of reality (our metaphysics), our interactions with reality (our agency) and much more» (P. Donati, *Being Human (or What?) in the Digital Matrix Land: The Construction of the Humanted*, in *Post-Human Futures. Human Enhancement, Artificial Intelligence and Social Theory*, ed. by M. Carrigan and D.V. Porpora, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 23-47, here p. 23).

[7] Pius XII, *Discorso ai partecipanti al congresso nazionale dell'Unione Cristiana Imprenditori Dirigenti del 7 marzo 1957*, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1957/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19570307_ucid.html (consulted on April 1st, 2025).

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therefore find an ethical way to deal with the technological challenge[8]. As we can see immediately, two very distinct perspectives of 'hope' emerge in the way in which Heidegger and Pius XII deal with technology.

What is characterizing our today's society, though, is neither the one nor the other dimension of 'hope' but a mere 'optimism': as we have seen, for sure no one feels anymore 'shame' because of the *Promethean gap*, and technics, also in their 'transhuman effects' on our society, is not anymore object of fear about the future. To the contrary, future has become the object of 'design' (or 'configuration'), through technology. What Heidegger described about the 'being', has become true about the 'future:' it is 'on our disposal'. Isn't it characteristic for our times that the doubt if the technological progress could flatten one day or stop, is not even considered – and that the only 'hope' has become the one that technological progress will never end and resolve the problems of human mankind? In this way, a real recognition of our human situation is missing out, and what is emerging under this 'optimism' is an indistinct feeling of anxiety. Hopelessness, indeed, can express itself as 'blind optimism' and 'anxiety', which determines then many dystopic visions of the future, and in many people assumes the form of 'fear'. Anxiety and fear block us and let us become completely passive towards the technological advancement which proposes a comprehension of reality always less oriented to the centrality of human dignity, and which is in *this sense* 'transhuman' (not in the sense of the transhuman

[8] The position of Pius XII is certainly based on an under-complex interpretation of the technological impact on society, which characterizes the ecclesial position on new technologies until today. The Vatican *Note* «Antiqua et nova» from January 14th, 2025, indeed, affirms that «the differences between human intelligence and current AI systems become evident. While AI is an extraordinary technological achievement capable of imitating certain outputs associated with human intelligence, it operates by performing tasks, achieving goals, or making decisions based on quantitative data and computational logic» (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html [consulted on March 2nd, 2025], n. 30). In this way, human agency is always presupposed as given, but Heidegger's argument is that right this assumption has become problematic in the technological era: «There are almost no human abilities left that are not already attributed to artificial systems today: perceiving, recognizing, thinking, reasoning, evaluating, or making decisions. Conversely, human consciousness today often appears to many as merely a sum of algorithms – a complex data structure in the brain that, in principle, could also be realized by electronic systems and is no longer necessarily tied to the living body» (T. Fuchs, *Menschliche und künstliche Intelligenz – ein kritischer Vergleich*, in *ntelligenz – Theoretische Grundlagen und praktische Anwendungen*, ed. by R.M. Holm-Hadulla *et al.*, Heidelberg University Publishing, Heidelberg 2021, pp. 347-362, here p. 348).

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agenda). If Turing and Heidegger have directed the philosophical gaze not toward what technology consists of in its individual manifestations, but toward what it means when technology takes over human functions, then likewise the perspective of hope in the technological age is not primarily about what one hopes for (*spes quae*), but about what it existentially means to be a hoping human being (*spes qua*) under the conditions of technology – and what anthropological and social-ethical prerequisites this requires.

What today is considered a reliable answer to the question of these fears are the ethical and political rules which, especially in Europe, are believed to be able to confront the dangers of technology *ex ante*. Besides the evident problematic how to 'rule in advance', and given the validity of the European *AI Act* – which was, in a dynamic called *Brussels effect*, emulated in many countries and parts of the world – it is clear, though, that 'rules' are not enough to face the real challenges of the new technologies for society. Besides them there is also need for hope, because while rules *imped* certain actions, *hope* is leading and inspiring us to find new solutions and to overcome the paralysing effects of anxiety. But to do so, it is important to focus on the foundations of hope, which are of a cultural and ethical nature. And it is precisely this dimension that is regrettably lacking in European reflection. What is missing is the awareness of the fact that if «technics only prevail when they can connect within their social context, then that means they solve a problem. So, both sides have to remain undefined: what problem, and what solution?»[9] In other words, before the question of 'which rules' we have to face the analysis what technics is telling us about our society and how we can collocate it in a perspective of future which is *not only technical*.

2. *Technology and the Human*

In recent times we notice another 'coincidence' between the reflections of the Pope and a Philosopher: while the Church got prepared to the *Jubilee of Hope*, Byung Chul-Han published a reflection on hope in which he took the distance from a Heideggerian pessimism, interpreting *The Spirit of Hope* as the capability to face the threatening challenges of our times and concretely of technics, instead of a 'blind optimism' which

[9] A. Nassehi, *Muster. Theorie der digitalen Gesellschaft*, Beck, München 2019, p. 18.

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he rejects. Hope means the opening of possibilities and of *time* which the technological dynamics 'block': «Those who hope, put their trust in possibilities that point beyond the 'badly existing'. Hope enables us *to break out of closed time as a prison*»[10]. Therefore, the contrary to hope is not 'despair' but rather 'anxiety', because it trappers the individual and isolates or separates it from any relationship. This would be the perspective of a world in which all is reduced to 'things', even the 'Others'[11]. It is this the real social effect of technics, according to Han: we don't perceive any more the presence of the Other, and therefore world and society are lacking of their most important dimension for the subject and its *intentionality*. Therefore, intentionality towards reality is deeply founded in an interpersonal context – and only in this interpersonal context hope as the «passion for the new»[12] can grow. It's by otherness that persons become persons, and their interiority can flourish. As St. Augustin knew, the 'interiority' has its real spiritual dimension while opening the subject to otherness.

'Hope', therefore, is also a dimension of time, and not in the sense of mere utopia, but of a different present time: in its intentionality it is a counterbalance to the *acceleration* which characterizes the 'time of technology'[13]. Therefore, AI can be translated as *accelerated intelligence*, and as Kahneman has shown, while human beings tend to avoid "System 2" which

[10] B.-C. Han, *Der Geist der Hoffnung. Wider die Gesellschaft der Angst*, Ullstein, Berlin 2024, p. 17.

[11] «Total interconnection and total communication by digital means does not facilitate encounters with Others. […] The imperative of authenticity engenders a narcissistic compulsion. Narcissism is distinct from healthy self-love, which has nothing pathological about it; it does not rule out love for the Other. The narcissist, however, is blind to the Other. The Other is bent into shape until the ego recognizes itself in them. The narcissistic subject perceives the world only in shadings of itself. This results in a disastrous consequence: the Other disappears» (B.-C. Han, *The Expulsion of the Other. Society, Perception and Communication Today*, transl. by W. Hoban, Polity, Cambridge-Medford (MA) 2018, pp. 9 and 26; cfr. id. *Der Geist der Hoffnung*, cit., p. 23).

[12] «The spirit of hope inspires action. It gives it a passion for the new. Action thus becomes passion. Whoever does not dream forward dares no new beginning. Without the spirit of hope, action withers away to mere activity or problem-solving» (B.-C. Han, *Der Geist der Hoffnung*, cit., p. 53). This is a further step of the 'de-refying' effect of information technologies: «The digital order *de-reifies* the world by *informatizing* it» (Id., *Non-things. Upheaval in the Lifeworld*, transl. by D. Steuer, Polity, Cambridge-Medford (MA) 2022, p. 1).

[13] The analysis of the connection between 'acceleration' and 'technology' is very complex, though. An obvious seeming consequence should be avoided: to consider the first as a mere result from the latter, because this would lead unavoidably to a radical critique of technics; cfr. R. Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, p. 157.

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is slow, deliberate, and logical and therefore requires effort and energy, this dimension is resigned always more to technology. In this way, we do not counterbalance anymore the "System 1" which is fast thinking that allows us to function efficiently, but can lead precisely for this characteristic to systematic biases and errors in judgment[14]. This observation reveals that it is not technology which by 'cyborgization' with the human brain transforms us (this happens in certain transhuman experiments), but rather by its cultural effects. It is by the way in which we use actively the new technologies that we transform ourselves and the 'rational' – which means 'relational' – structure of reality. But Kahneman himself, by describing our decisional structure, sees human judgements and actions always as a collaboration between both Systems, and in this collaboration, we can try to see a possibility for thinking about an integration of human and artificial intelligence in the realization of social complex situations. This means, that IA technology can only be understood as part of the realization of human intelligence and not vice versa. And this leads to the specific characterization of spirit as relational realization[15].

Not by chance, Han refers to Gabriel Marcel when he specifies the hope as an interpersonal structure and relationship: for him, «the most appropriate and refined expression of the act that the verb *to hope* translates in a still confused and veiled way» is «I hope in you for us»[16]. By saying this, he places hope within the concrete dimension of the individual's existence, which cannot stand apart from the relationship with the other. Therefore, he emphasizes the «superiority of the relationship expressed by the words *to hope in*. It seems that a philosophy based on the principle of contract is prone to ignoring what gives value to this relationship»[17]. In other words, if we realize humanity – and we cannot do it without realizing

[14] Massarenti comments this actual dynamic in this way: «It is our tendency to rely too often on the speed of our thoughts that leads us to make foolish or wrong – if not dangerous – decisions. And this happens even if we are very intelligent!» (A. Massarenti, *Come siamo diventati stupidi. Una immodesta proposta per tornare intelligenti*, Guerini e Associati, Milano 2024, p. 154).

[15] This was also the central insight of Hegel and the very distinctive dimension of *spirit* diverse from *materia*: the spirit is "in itself" only while being in otherness, and this constitutes its specific structure of "I that is We and We that is I"; cfr. I. Testa and L. Ruggiu, *"I that is We, We that is I". Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel. Social Ontology, Recognition, Naturalism, and the Critique of Kantian Constructivism*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2016.

[16] G. Marcel, *Homo viator. Prolegomeni ad una metafisica della speranza*, transl. by L. Castiglione and M. Rettori, Borla, Roma 1967, pp. 47 and 72.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

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ourselves through relationship – than we raised the most effective defence wall against the 'threatening' of technology[18]. It is within this relationship that hope doesn't remain a mere 'subjective mood' but becomes intention for action: the human being is characterised, in other words, by theoretical and practical intentionality. And here stands a characteristic of Christian hope, which is expressed by the Social Doctrine of Church: it translates hope into action and proposes a concrete way of living relationships[19].

But maybe this ethical reflection is not enough. Because technology is not something that 'looms over' the human being from an external instance, but rather, it is shaped by the human being's own self-understanding, which is realized through technology. It is thus mistaken to separate 'human nature' and 'technology'; and if they can only be properly understood in their mutual relation, then this also means that the specific form of digital technologies corresponds to concrete human needs – particularly the need to organize oneself within the process of social realization[20]. 'Information', therefore, is not a mysterious entity in which the whole reality is becoming transformed and where the human being is transformed into its 'divine' sublimation, but a way to *order* an extremely complex reality, and it is clear that this way of ordering social complexity does not 'naturally' assign to the human being its centrality. In the age of information, organization is completely horizontal, binary, and based on probability calculations grounded in an understanding of reality as data. And if 'information' always served to create connections and therefore organize society and establish power, what does it mean if it has lost any reference to an objective value – as it has been *human dignity* in modern social organization for example? Against Harari's assumption that information never had this reference, the real

[18] «The relational approach to social organisations can show why and how AI and robots cannot replace humans because of the specific generative character of inter-human relations» (P. Donati, *The digital matrix and the hybridisation of society*, in *Post-Human Institutions and Organisations: Confronting the Matrix*, ed. by I. Al-Amoudi and E. Lazega, Routledge, Abingdon 2019, pp. 67-92, here p. 86).

[19] Indeed, a critique which is often pronounced to Han's consideration is that «[s]ome still won't be impressed. The book is repetitive in places and stays at the level of theory. If you are looking for practical steps to slow climate change or achieve world peace, *The Spirit of Hope* will disappoint. If you are looking for arguments that are thoroughly qualified and nuanced, you won't like Han's bracingly strong claims» (S. Knepper, *Hope Out of Dispair: A Review of Byung-Chul Han's The Spirit of Hope*, in «Front Porch Republic», https://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2024/12/hope-out-of-despair-a-review-of-byung-chul-hans-the-spirit-of-hope/, consulted on March 9th, 2025).

[20] Cfr. A. Nassehi, *Muster*, cit., p. 37.

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question is which consequences does it have if information is only about creating connections, not being referred to reality. In this case, indeed, information can pretend to be the solution of all the problems, because the maximum of evidence is not reference but tautology (A=A). And without this reference, hope is not any more an issue: it implodes in the universal non-explicability of the system of information in which, indeed, we 'trust' the probability factor of information and take this assumption for granted as affirmation on reality. In this way, the system of information substitutes any metaphysical reference and «nourishes the hope of finally being able to once again rely on certainties and provide ultimate foundations»[21]. But hope lives of this «true creativity which consists in adding a new dimension to what already exists. The new point lies outside the plane of what is already known. For someone trapped within that plane – like an ant – it's impossible to see the point in space; they can only project it onto the surface on which they move»[22]. As Pierpaolo Donati puts it, what is happening is the division between the social dimension and the human dimension, and while the first one is the 'problem perceived' for which 'technology is the answer' (Nassehi), the latter one finds tendentially less possibilities of its expression and concrete recognition: «In today's future-oriented societies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attribute a truly human quality to social life. The human has become an immense battlefield, where what is at stake is the very way in which relationships are conceived and practiced as the generative bond of human life. The social is no longer perceived as the place where the human dwells»[23].

Human dignity, in other words, is something practice, and without an intelligence which is able to form reality though the realization of practical judgements, it does not become real. «Judgments of practical reason not only have a semantic dimension and a reference to certain states of affairs in the world; because of their prescriptive character, they also aim at concrete action. The practical insight that certain normative reasons speak in favour of an action seeks to become effective in action»[24]. In other words,

[21] R. Feustel, «Am Anfang war die Information». *Digitalisierung als Religion*, Verbrecher, Berlin 2018, p. 116.

[22] R. Manzotti and S. Rossi, *Io & Ia. Mente, Cervello e GPT*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli (CZ) 2023, p. 154.

[23] P. Donati, *Il destino dell'umanesimo: il terzo (incluso) come relazione tra umano e sociale*, in «Annales Theologici», XXXVI, 2022, pp. 179-200, here p. 179.

[24] F.-J. Bormann, *Ist die praktische Vernunft*, cit., p. 58.

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hope is proactive[25], and therefore expresses an utopian force: it wants to transform reality. It introduces the 'third element' in the logic, which is important to perceive finality and a moral perspective, as already Simmel confirmed: «the structure of purpose is ternary, while that of mechanism is only binary»[26]. But already Guardini demonstrated that binary structures are not generative, and that human polarities are diverse: while mechanisms are closed, predictable, and static and do not let room for surprise, development, or transformation, polarities generate energy, challenge, and possibility. In this way, technology brings back to human reality because only by the precedence of the ternary logic, the binary can be understood[27]. At the same time, there is no need to reduce reality to the binary logic, and a perspective of hope is emerging beyond it. This dimension can be anthropologically confirmed, finding therefore the reason why for the Social Doctrine of Church, technology does not constitute a threat to the constitutive precedence of human being, and ethical advises result very clearly from this approach which therefore seems superficial only at its very surface of Magisterial pronunciation.

It is a very specific moment in the *corpus* of the Catholic Social Doctrine, that the Pope is referring explicitly to philosophical-anthropological considerations. In his Address to the G7 session on artificial intelligence, on June 14th, 2024, Pope Francis stated: «Our ability to fashion tools, in a quantity and complexity that is unparalleled among living things, speaks of a *techno-human condition*: human beings have always maintained a relationship with the environment mediated by the tools they gradually produced. It is not possible to separate the history of men and women and of

[25] «Hope has an *active core*. The spirit of hope animates and inspires our actions» (B.-C. Han, *Der Geist der Hoffnung*, cit., p. 41).

[26] G. Simmel, *Filosofia del denaro*, UTET, Torino 1984, p. 302.

[27] «Not absolute variation therefore, but living variation, not rigid uniformity, but living. But all this means: rhythm» (R. Guardini, *L'opposizione polare. Saggio per una filosofia del concreto vivente*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1997, p. 115). And not only Donati confirms: «While binary bits are simply read as 1 or 0, quantum bits, on the other hand, allow computers to read any value between 0 and 1, making much more sophisticated and faster calculations possible» (P. Donati, *Il destino*, cit., p. 187), but also the High Tech developer Federico Faggin: «consciousness cannot emerge from non-conscious matter, whereas unconsciousness can arise either as an absence of consciousness or as a very limited form of it. In the same way, free will – which requires indeterminism – cannot emerge from determinism. However, determinism can emerge from indeterminism, just as classical physics emerges from quantum physics» (F. Faggin, *Oltre l'invisibile Dove scienza e spiritualità si uniscono*, Mondadori, Milano, p. 14).

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civilization from the history of these tools. Some have wanted to read into this a kind of shortcoming, a deficit, within human beings, as if, because of this deficiency, they were forced to create technology[28]. A careful and objective view actually shows us the opposite. We experience a state of "outwardness" with respect to our biological being: we are beings inclined toward what lies outside-of-us, indeed we are radically open to the beyond»[29]. A deeper and systematic reflection on this affirmation can help us to individuate the specific perspectives of hope through technology.

3. *The personological difference*

By explicitly rejecting the anthropological approach of Arnold Gehlen, and indirectly affirming the possibility to consider instead Helmuth Plessner's approach in order to develop a positive-critic perspective on the new technologies, Pope Francis gives in this *Address* an important hermeneutical tool: IA is not in a relationship of *concurrence* to human nature, and can give therefore important insights on how to realize the dimension of 'hope.' For Plessner, indeed, it is not about to theorize a static essence of human being, but to uncover its structural position: in the 'new order' of information, what is to be discovered is the 'position' of human being in the real world and how the real world should be understood from the 'positional' and not 'essential' point of view. If all life is different from not living beings, then it is characterized by a its characteristic positionality: by reflective relationships and behaving in the world, the human being has its world, not by being 'put' into a metaphysical order[30]. While plants have an «open positionality», because they do not distinguish organically between themselves and the world around, a bodily life as that of animals is characterized by «centric positionality»: and here is a first characteristic for the confrontation with the digital matrix in which this centricity cannot be explained. The difference of human beings lies in the fact that they transcend this structure through their capacity

[28] Here the reference is to: A. Gehlen, *L'uomo. La sua natura e il suo posto nel mondo*, transl. by C. Mainoldi, Feltrinelli, Milano 1983, p. 43.

[29] Pope Francis, *Address to the G7 Session on Artificial Intelligence*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/june/documents/20240614-g7-intelligenza-artificiale.html (consulted on October 25th, 2025).

[30] Cfr. H. Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human. An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, transl. by M. Hyatt, Fordham University Press, New York 2019.

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to distance themselves from themselves. The human being is at once within its body and outside it, able to observe itself, to reflect upon its own actions, to anticipate, to laugh at itself, to feel shame, and to construct meaning beyond immediate experience[31]. This is what in Hegel is the dynamics of spirit in its difference to *materia*. So the human being *has* its body, *has* a world and a relationship to others, and *is realizing itself* only through this relationship. The specificity of bodily existence lies in the fact that the *limit* of the body is not a passive-ontological reality but the original realization of the living body, and the spirit is intimately bound on this structure. By being outside its centre[32], human existence is realizing itself only through positive relationship to others[33]. Even the relationship to itself is constitutively mediated by the category of otherness. That's why otherness cannot be distinguished from personal identity, and this dimension characterizes the person in its difference to things. This is, as we can say, the *personological difference*[34]: «in principle the AI/robot can perform the first operation (being for oneself) but not the second (being for others), because to be able to implement second-order relational reflexivity it should have the same relational nature of humans»[35].

Plessner specifies this reality through the three laws of «natural artificiality», of «mediated immediacy», and of «utopian standpoint». By the first law, he expresses the positive way to confront himself with technology: it is not – as in Gehlen – an expression of a human 'misery' o 'limiteness' where the limit is always interpreted in a negative way and therefore technics appears as a concurrence to human being. If, the other way round, the human reality is for itself technical, then the dimension of technology is a positive reality of realizing the human being. Therefore, it can be avoided the methodology of the majority of theological approaches which collocate themselves in a confrontation with *transhumanism*, giving to this the interpreting precedence, while the reality is characterised not by transhumanism but by the *technological condition* of the human being. By the second law, human being realizes a dynamic which is characterizing its relationship in

[31] «The animal lives out from its center and into its center but not *as* center. [...] it is a system that refers back to itself, a self, but it does not experience – itself» (*ibid.*, p. 267).

[32] «If the life of the animal is centric, the life of the human, although unable to break out of this centrality, is at the same time out of it and thus excentric» (*ibid.*, p. 271).

[33] «The excentric form of his positionality ensures the real ity of the shared world for the human» (*ibid.*, p. 280).

[34] Here we can see the possibility for an important dialogue with Robert Spaemann.

[35] P. Donati, *Being human*, cit., pp. 39-40.

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a specific way: not by immediacy – as the artificial reality of machines – but by *mediated immediacy*, and the mediation is the body. So it is the biological body which – in its immediacy – guarantees the *mediation* that is characteristic for the spirit[36], and we have a proof of the substantial coincidence between the structure of the biological human body and the spirit (or the *hylemorphical union*, in Thomistic terms). And the third point is the one which engages the topic of hope: the human being is structurally a being of hope, and without hope, there is an anthropological lack in its realization. Plessner formulates this hope as grounding in «the consciousness of the absolute contingency of existence» which makes awaken the consciousness «of necessary being resting in itself, of the absolute or God» which is not faith (it becomes faith only if this absolute «reality corresponding to his excentricity» gets fixed): therefore what emerges here is a dimension of hope beyond (or better: before) any faith[37]. This dimension emerges in the affirmation which at the same time confirms what was affirmed above: «The human is the shared world. The human is humanity— that is, as an individual he can be substituted and replaced in an absolute sense»[38].

What is called here the *personological difference* is the way in which the human *person* (not the subject) is realizing its uniqueness and therefore *dignity* (in the Kantian sense) by realizing reflexive relationships (to itself, the others, God), *through its bodily existence*. These are the *locus* of hope and of the realization of human projects[39]. Relationship is therefore either reflexive (*intellectus*) either bodily (*voluntas*). The *chiffre* for human realization is therefore not the third person (it, the 'robot'), neither the first person (the egologic transcendental subject) but the *other* (and therefore a you-relation). As we can see, Marcel's structure of hope is confirmed by this anthropological ground-reflection towards the technological challenge.

[36] «This means, for one, that while his relationship to other things is indirect, he lives it as a direct, immediate relationship just like the animal – inasmuch as he, like the animal, is subject to the law of the closed form of life and this form's positionality. Second, it means that he knows of the indirectness of his relationship; it is given to him as mediated» (H. Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human*, cit., p. 302).

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 317.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 318.

[39] «What is certain is that AIs and robots cannot create social capital per se. They cannot defi ne our well-being and they cannot create relational goods, such as trust or friendship. There can there be no 'we believe' between humans and robots» (P. Donati, *Being human*, cit., p. 41).

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4. *Technology and the question of God*

If technological production is an essential expression of human eccentricity – humans must build, extend, and supplement themselves because of their structural openness – then technology is not *in itself* a dimension which impedes the faithful relationship to God, but can – the other way round – be a *topos* or a hermeneutical way to understand something of this relationship. Could it be that in the end of the day technology brings us closer to God, and not by a Heideggerian *disperation* ("Only a God Can Save Us"[40]) but in a positive-Christian matter?

One of the important outcomes of Plessner's anthropology, indeed, was the possibility to understand the dimension of 'hope' as the perspective of the 'perfection' of the finite (which is not its 'absolutization') – in the transhumanist idea of an infinite augmention of intramundane perfection, this per definition cannot be reached: «While transhumanist visions of the future seek to infinitely enhance and optimize the finite within the immanent, purely quantitative realm, the Christian faith envisions, by contrast, a qualitative and definitive fulfilment of the finite – setting theological finality against transhumanist infinity»[41]. In this perspective, hope becomes the capacity to admit and affirm entirely the worldly reality, and to live it also in its dimensions of fragility and pain which a transhumanistic optimism continuously negate. Hope, from a theological perspective, is the capacity to create new beginnings for this world, in attentiveness to the pain and suffering of the world. Neither for the Greek thought, neither for IA, the dimension of suffering can assume a potential sense for discovering humanity and therefore hope as significance for the present[42]. «Artificial intelligence is a mirror of ourselves as human beings. The question of whether robots are meant to replace us entirely or merely serve as our assistants comes only second. First and foremost, we need to confront the much deeper question

[40] M. Heidegger, *"Only a God Can Save Us": The* Spiegel *Interview (1966)*, in *Heidegger. The Man and the Thinker*, ed. by T. Sheehan, Transaction, New Brunswick (NJ)-London 1981, pp. 45-68.

[41] O. Dürr, *Homo Novus. Vollendlichkeit im Zeitalter des Transhumanismus. Beiträge zu einer Techniktheologie*, Aschendorff, Münster 2021, p. 22.

[42] «Without suffering, no form of knowledge is possible that could radically break with the past. [...] The negativity of suffering is constitutive for thinking. It is, therefore, suffering that distinguishes human thinking from calculation and artificial intelligence» (B.-C. Han, *La società senza dolore. Perché abbiamo bandito la sofferenza dalle nostre vite*, transl. by S. Aglan-Buttazzi, Einaudi, Torino 2021, p. 53).

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of who and what we, as humans, actually are»[43]: therefore, the 'hope' is not that technology will resolve our problems but that human being will be able to discover itself, its dignity and social responsibility, also in the dimension of *infosphere*.

So the theological discourse of hope is not only meant in an eschatological perspective of faith, but also as a sense-giving dimension for a human society: «Where hope should arise, it ought to be established and secured as a new and original concept of earthly possibilities, set against those of the otherworldly»[44]. Theology – especially in this *Jubilee of Hope* – should not skitter away from this social responsibility of the discourse on God, restraining the hope only to the field defined and prepared by faith. God should be a perspective of hope also for the secular society in its technological challenges: «Public debate needs an open, metaphysically aware discussion about God – precisely because the question is not only whether God exists, but also what kind of rationality we are willing to accept»[45].

And as we have seen, rationality is no longer anything theoretical, but has to do with human culture and the defeat of anxiety which has returned in our "crisis epoch". «Today's anxiety [...] takes place within the everyday consensus. It is an everyday fear»[46]. Hope is not only about the openness to new possibilities of reality. It is not by chance that the whole Christian tradition has always distinguished between faith and hope. Hope is about the common realization of a human project: it does not research for 'partners' who share a common 'faith' but realizes a new form of humanity where others cannot see a way to change reality. The Good Samaritan is the archetype of hope which consists in the interruption – in the refusal to accept the world as it is. The Good Samaritan does not ask whether the wounded man deserves help, whether it is efficient, or whether someone else should act. He becomes hope for the wounded man simply by showing up, by being present, by crossing the boundary between distance and nearness.

The reason why we lose hope today is that we don't care anymore about the quality of our social relationships: «it is not enough to improve

[43] G. Stocker, *Von künstlicher Intelligenz zur socialen Intelligenz*, in *Gott und die digitale Revolution*, ed. by S.J. Lederhilger, Pustet, Regensburg 2019, pp. 73-96, here p. 74.

[44] H. Blumenberg, *Säkularisierung und Selbstbehauptung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1983², p. 40.

[45] R. Presilla, *La società tecnologica senza Dio?*, in «Vita e Pensiero», CVIII, 2025, n. 1, pp. 77-83, here p. 83.

[46] B.-C. Han, *The Expulsion*, cit., p. 34.

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the abilities and performances of an individual (its body and/or mind) or a social group or organization, but it is necessary to verify that enhancement operations have positive repercussions on the persons' social (i.e., 'relational') life»[47].

Conclusions

Hope in the technological age cannot be naïve. It must pass through the lucidity of Anders, the attentiveness of Heidegger, the critique of Han, and the existential analysis of Marcel. Following the indications of the Social Doctrine of Church, it has to be anthropologically grounded and Plessner's view can give such a reason for rediscovering human dignity as distinguished quality of human relationships, as Donati claims. Through these analyses emerge a perspective of hope which does not ignore the dangers and alienations technology brings, and neither can it surrender to despair. What this approach wants to realize is an anthropological grounding of hope as an existential disposition of the subject which permits to face the challenges of technology in a constructive but not 'blind' way. Theology and Social Doctrine of Church should actively take part at this discourse. The question to which 'human projects' we want to use these technologies become, in this perspective, central – and an anthropological situated hope is the hermeneutical criterium for individuating them.

The loss of the existential sense of humanity, which emerges through the disappear of the 'Other' and the human condition as fragility and limitedness, can be illustrated by the fact that in the technological condition, "Being able to write a good prompt" has taken the place of the capacity of "being able to put the right questions": but in the measure in which all questions become tendentially the same, society loses hope. Rediscovering the Social Doctrine of Church and its anthropological implications in order to reflect on the concrete possibilities to realize humanity in the technological era, is an important contribution, because «[t]o the hopeful, the world appears in a different light. Hope gives the world a special *radiance*; it *brightens* the world»[48].

[47] P. Donati, *Being Human*, cit., p. 24.
[48] B.-C. Han, *Der Geist der Hoffnung*, cit., p. 39.

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