



Degree Programme in
“Economia e Management”

Course of *Digital Ethics*

The Prosopon
Ethos: a Person-
Centred Ethical
Paradigm for the
Onlife Age

How a Person-Centred Way of Life
Can Transform the Onlife Society

Prof. Sebastiano Maffettone

SUPERVISOR

Flavio Illuzzi 250611

CANDIDATE

Academic Year

2024 - 2025

Sommario

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>Chapter 1 – The Prosopon Ethos: a new definition of ethics</i>	4
1.1 <i>What is Ethics?</i>	4
1.2 <i>“Good” as a Personal Relational Mode</i>	8
1.3 <i>The Prosopon Ethos as an Ethical Proposal</i>	12
<i>Chapter 2 - The Onlife World</i>	16
2.2 <i>The dark side of the Onlife World</i>	20
2.3 <i>The opportunities provided by the Onlife World</i>	23
2.4 <i>Ethics and Culture as Artefacts, Artefacts as Expressions of Human Behaviour</i>	24
<i>Chapter 3 - Towards Universal Public Ethics</i>	29
3.1 <i>The Aim of the Prosopon Ethos: a Personal Society</i>	29
3.2 <i>Truth as the Outcome of Personal Experience</i>	32
3.3 <i>The Historical Roots of the Crisis of Normativity</i>	34
3.4 <i>A Relational Interpretation of the Crisis of Normativity</i>	38
3.5 <i>Transcendence and Normativity</i>	41
<i>Conclusion</i>	43
<i>Bibliography</i>	46
<i>Further reading</i>	50

Introduction

ABSTRACT

*The aim of this thesis is to make a contribution to the debate fuelled by the "Rome Call for AI Ethics," promoted by the Pontifical Academy for Life, by showing how digital ethics intersects with other ethical dimensions of social action (business, environment, politics) and how the challenges thus posed are rooted in anthropological and metaphysical issues. The movement originated from the Rome Call, which was grounded in the notion of "algorethics", is intended to direct the development of artificial intelligence towards the common good and the safeguarding of human dignity. It has assumed global proportions, culminating in the joint signing of the Abrahamic religions' document (January 10, 2023) and the "AI Ethics for Peace" meeting held in Hiroshima (July 9–10, 2024). Assuming that the human being is a *Prosopon*—a constitutively relational subject—it is argued that the ethics of a society depends on the type of relationships established between its citizens and, in particular, on the adoption or not of a given lifestyle, here called the *Prosopon Ethos*.*

The "Rome Call for AI Ethics" is a document in keeping with which various institutional entities have committed themselves to the promotion of the correct development of artificial intelligence (AI) availing themselves of a new approach called *algorethics*¹, or ethics by design. This approach aims at ensuring that the development of AI prioritises the common good and human dignity rather than focusing on profit or human replacement alone. This project was launched and promoted by the Pontifical Academy for Life, presided over by Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia. The initial signatories were Microsoft, IBM, FAO, and the Italian Ministry of Innovation, who met the Italian Government in Rome on the 28th of February 2020. Over the following years, the number of signatories increased exponentially, thanks to the efforts of the RenAIssance Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded by Pope Francis on the 12th of April 2021. A significant milestone was reached on the 10th of January 2023, when representatives of the Abrahamic religions who met in the Vatican City signed the document jointly. These signatories included Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Chief Rabbi Eliezer Simha Weisz, member of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and Sheikh Al Mahfoudh Bin Bayyah, representing Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, head of the Abu Dhabi Peace Forum and chairman of the UAE Fatwa Council.

A further milestone was reached at the "AI Ethics for Peace" event held in Hiroshima on the 9th and 10th of July 2024, which brought together representatives of eleven of the world's religions. During this meeting, the attendees signed the *Rome Call for AI Ethics* agreement and, subsequently, the Hiroshima Appeal. The event's greatest success featured discussions on AI ethics coupled with an appeal for the peaceful resolution of all conflicts, including armed ones. This petition, besides underlining the fact that one of the most dangerous

¹Paolo Benanti, in Pontifical Academy for Life, *Roboethics: Humans, Machines and Health*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019; see also Paolo Benanti, *Le macchine sapienti. Intelligenze artificiali e decisioni umane*, Milano, Marietti 1820, ed. 2018.

applications of artificial intelligence is that associated with armed conflicts, also made it clear that the issue of the ethics of AI and, more generally, that of digital systems, could not be addressed as self-contained issues. There has been considerable discussion in recent years regarding these topics and many proposals have emerged, some of which have even become felicitous realities, for example the *AI Act*, the first complete set of regulations in the world regarding AI, which came into force on the 1st of August 2024 in the European Union. While acknowledging the immense value of achievements like these, it is important to emphasise how the problem of digital ethics requires a holistic approach, such as to permit it to be framed within a broader context. This is one of the greatest merits of the movement which came to life around the *Rome Call for AI Ethics* and *AI Ethics for Peace*, which represent unique opportunities provided by history not only to open new pathways leading towards an ethics of digital and AI systems but also drive attempts at global coordination capable of favouring a better and more fraternal world.

This thesis would like to make a contribution to the on-going dialogue inspired by the *Rome Call for AI Ethics* and the *AI Ethics for Peace*, while acting as a response to the appeal launched by these initiatives. It proposes a rereading of digital ethics such as to demonstrate how this particular matter is connected to almost all the other ethical questions of the contemporary world (business ethics, economic ethics, environmental ethics, public ethics etc.) and how the challenges arising originate ultimately from deeper anthropological and metaphysical issues. The focal question of digital and applied ethics will be transformed into a question concerning human beings, their behaviour and their modes of existence. In particular, the aim is to show how the culture and ethics of a society are influenced by the choices people make regarding different possible ways of approaching life: choices which have an impact upon every sphere of social life.

This dissertation seeks to provide a specific vision of the human being as *Prosopon*, meaning a person who may be regarded as an irreplaceable subject endowed within a mandatory relational dynamic. It will discuss how this notion may act as an adhesive binding all disciplines to generate an ethical paradigm called the *Prosopon Ethos*, which human organisations and societies may adopt and which may prove capable of generating specific applied ethical practices. This ethical paradigm aims at being intercultural and inter-subjective, at transcending cultural barriers and finding expression in specific actions applicable across different contexts. In fact, the notion of *Prosopon* fosters true interdisciplinarity and interculturality and the result of all this should bring about a transition from isolated applied ethics to a shared, person-centred ethical culture.

It will be analysed how this notion may act as an adhesive between all disciplines to generate an ethical paradigm called the *Prosopon Ethos*, which human organisations and societies can adopt and which should be capable of engendering specific applied ethical practices. This ethical paradigm is intercultural and inter-subjective and seeks to transcend cultural barriers and find expression in specific actions applicable across different contexts. The notion of *Prosopon* is to foster true interdisciplinarity and interculturality and bring about a transition from isolated applied ethics to a shared, person-centred ethical culture.

Chapter 1 – The *Prosopon Ethos*: a new definition of ethics

1.1 What is Ethics?

ABSTRACT

The present dissertation seeks to provide a redefinition of ethics suited to the exigencies of the current Onlife context, by relaunching normativity as well as a reconciliation with metaphysics and lived experience. Following Benanti and Maffettone, it makes a distinction between ethos (experience) and ethikos (reflection) and revisits the definition of public ethics as the "morality of institutions." Then, it goes on to investigate the terminological roots of ethics and rediscover "ethos" as "character/dwelling" (Heraclitus; Heidegger) and, in a Levinasian manner, the primacy of the Other in the establishment of subjectivity and responsibility. In this sense (Buber, Marion, Ricœur), the human is a co-being because relationship precedes and structures experience and is driven by two forces, relatedness and identity (Fromm). From the interaction between these forces three possible modes of relationship stem: impersonal (uniforming abstraction), individual (self-referential separation), and personal (unity in diversity).

To describe the historical context in which we find ourselves we shall use the term *Onlife*, coined by Professor Floridi to emphasise how, nowadays, the digital realm, seen as a space, seems to blend inextricably with physical space. This *Onlife*² includes, therefore, a series of phenomena and tools, such as AI or Big Data, the use of which poses a variety of different moral dilemmas. Hypotheses regarding the meaning of ethics and the use of the "ethical" lens to analyse and address the complex phenomena of this world of ours have become quite viral. This thesis aims to contribute to the formulation of a new definition of ethics better able to address contemporary issues.

It is appropriate to begin with the definition of ethics provided by Paolo Benanti and Sebastiano Maffettone in *Noi e la macchina*³ as it sums up extremely well the meaning of this term with reference to the Western cultural tradition. Paolo Benanti (1973–), a Franciscan friar and professor of the ethics of technology at Rome's Luiss Guido Carli University, and Sebastiano Maffettone (1948–), full professor of Political Philosophy at the same university and director of the Observatory of Ethos, in the volume they wrote jointly, provide us with a critical reflection concerning the humanisation of digital technologies, centred on the concept of digital sustainability. According to the approach of these two authors, we can distinguish between *ethos*, which traditionally indicates ethics as lived experience and behaviour oriented towards the Good, and *ethikos*, which refers to the study and analysis directly regarding correct behaviour or focused on some moral arguments and the dilemmas that people may have to face. In the latter case, we speak of moral philosophy, or moral theory, which consists in attempts at arguing for or against alternative answers to the various moral dilemmas chosen for discussion⁴. In a previous work of his, Maffettone suggested dividing moral philosophy into four parts. The first, called

² Luciano Floridi, ed., *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*, Cham: Springer, 2015.

³ Paolo Benanti and Sebastiano Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina. Un'etica per l'era digitale*, Roma: Luiss University Press, 2024.

⁴ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 73

descriptive ethics, has the task of describing modes of behaviour endowed with moral significance⁵, though complete consensus regarding its affiliation with ethics has not been reached, due to its proximity to moral sociology, ethical anthropology, and moral psychology. Then comes the category of *metaethics*, which investigates the validity and limits of moral issues, focusing in particular on "the meaning of key moral terms, such as *good* and *just*, or *responsibility*, moral ontology, as well as the criteria of justification and their validity"⁶. The third class is *normative ethics*, which formulates the principles and theories that provide the rules according to which moral dilemmas can be resolved. Finally, when these moral dilemmas become concrete, we enter the field of applied ethics⁷ where we also find digital ethics. The latter is an attempt "at joining together an ancient tradition like ethics with a set of novels, often disturbing events, like those associated with the digital revolution"⁸. Another important aspect of ethics is public ethics⁹, which Maffettone considers "the morality of institutions". Public ethics is distinct from individual morality: the former concerns the public sphere and aims to justify obligations and norms that are "right" for all, in a way that is understandable and acceptable to each citizen, in a pluralistic context. The latter regards the sphere of personal conscience, the values of "good" which can vary radically from individual to individual. However, the two should be considered as being complementary and closely linked to each other¹⁰.

Departing from the notions touched on so far, this thesis aims to propose an original vision of ethics, whose basic assumption is that the reinforcement of ethical responses to contemporary problems can only occur thanks to a relaunching of normativity¹¹, so as to permit a rediscovery of a new type of union between metaphysics and lived experience. We shall endeavour to demonstrate that the crisis of normativity and its separation from metaphysics and lived experience may be at the root of the difficulty in moving beyond the limits of contemporary ethics so as to have a positive impact on global phenomena. The ambitious goal of this thesis is to proffer a solution capable of combining metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics, public ethics, and ethics as lived experience in a sole paradigm.

Let us, therefore, examine the very first meaning ever attributed to the term *ethos* and for which we have documentary evidence. This is *fragment 119* of the writings of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, one of the foremost pre-Socratic thinkers who lived between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE and who defines *ethos* as the "character of," "the way of being" specific to the human being. From this primary meaning, it emerges that ethics concerns not only behaviour but also being. The interpretation of fragment 119 by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), considered one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, a central figure in continental philosophy and existentialism, known for his investigations into human

⁵ Sebastiano Maffettone, *Etica pubblica. La moralità delle istituzioni nel terzo millennio*, Milano: il Saggiatore, 2001, p. 29

⁶ Maffettone, *Etica pubblica*, p. 29

⁷ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 78

⁸ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 67 (author's translation)

⁹ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p.92

¹⁰ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p.92

¹¹ We shall deal with the crises of normativity and metaphysics in the third chapter.

being and existence, is extremely interesting. He addressed this issue in his work *Letter on Humanism*.¹², where he translates it as “abode” (*Aufenthalt*), a “dwelling place”. According to the German philosopher *ethos* is an open region with which the human being resides. He holds that

The open region of his abode allows what pertains to the essence of the human being, and what in thus arriving resides in nearness to him, to appear. The abode of the human being contains and preserves the advent of what belongs to the human being in his essence. According to Heraclitus's phrase this is the god. The fragment says: The human being dwells, insofar as he is a human being, in the nearness of God.¹³

What is proper to humans (their *ethos*) is openness towards the otherness that establishes them and allows them to exist. In this sense, for Heidegger, the subject, *Dasein*, is "thrown" into the world and does not establish itself. Starting from this idea of Heidegger's, one can take a step further, like Emmanuel Lévinas (a French philosopher of Lithuanian origin and one of the main thinkers of the twentieth century) did. His work placed ethics at the centre as "prime" philosophy, founded on infinite responsibility towards the *Other*. In texts such as *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974), he developed a radical critique of traditional ontology, shifting the focus from the primacy of being to the primacy of the ethical relationship. According to this view, there is an "other" that constitutes the subject and precedes it.

It is, therefore, the call of the other that brings subjectivity to the fore, which, when obliged to address the face, acquires immediate ethical responsibility¹⁴. Many other authoritative European philosophers of the twentieth century have developed considerations in this sense, too. Of these we choose to mention here Martin Buber (1878–1965), a Jewish philosopher and theologian known for his dialogical thinking¹⁵; Jean-Luc Marion (1946–), a contemporary French philosopher who deals with phenomenology and theology¹⁶; and Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), another French philosopher who drew up an original line of thinking between hermeneutics and ethics¹⁷. These thinkers showed how the human being, his/her "character," and, therefore, his/her *ethos*, involve *co-being*, a modality of *being-with-the-other*. In this sense, the essence of being human appears to coincide with relationship, that is, the way we assume a position and relate to others. Relationship, therefore, does not concern only *ethos*, seen as behaviour or *ethikos* or moral reflection, but also coincides with *ethos* intended as the original structure of the entire human experience, which even precedes metaphysics. Therefore, when we speak of a manner of being, a mode of existence, or a way of life, we simply mean *ethics* as the mode of the self-other relationship. This self–other relationship is characterised by two fundamental drives that coincide with what Erich Fromm (1900–1980)—the German-born, naturalised American social philosopher

¹² Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

¹³ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

¹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, London: Continuum, 2004.

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2016.

¹⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; repr. 2020.

and psychoanalyst associated with the Frankfurt School—called ‘relatedness’, namely the desire for union with others, and ‘identity’, namely the desire to affirm one’s identity in distinction from others¹⁸. Fromm combined psychoanalysis, philosophy, and ethics, focusing on the freedom and responsibility of the modern human being. His most influential work in this direction is *The Art of Loving* (1956), where he shows how human beings realise themselves only through responsible relationships with others. According to Fromm, the mature individual is one who manages to live by finding a balance between these two drives, avoiding both conformism, which nullifies the uniqueness of the self, and isolation from others. This "other" we avail of to define ourselves and which Fromm held to mean other individuals, may also be an object characteristic of human experience (a principle, an idea, a historical fact, a phenomenon, a space, etc.). All told, *ethos* is a human mode of being intended as co-being, as a relationship.

The self-other relationship, as the original structure and foundation of human experience, may comprise of three different modes, which we shall call modes of relationship (of existence or coexistence): impersonal, individual, and personal. The first two are the outcome of our desire, for *relatedness* the first, for *identity* the second, and were introduced for the first time by Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), the most important Russian philosopher and theologian of the nineteenth century, the father of all subsequent Russian religious philosophy. An original figure within the cultural panorama of his time, he opposed radical positivism and sought to give an ethical and spiritual foundation back to philosophy. His ideas, capable of drawing on the Eastern Patristic tradition and engaging in dialogue with Western philosophical culture, make of him a philosophical outsider, a bridge between two, often opposing, worlds. In this sense, his work may be considered prophetic: many of his insights remain surprisingly relevant and continue to point towards a pathway of fruitful dialogue between East and West.

According to him when the desire for union prevails within the self-other relationship, the self identifies with the other, renouncing its own identity, thus generating that indistinct unity that is uniformity, founded on necessity, not on free observance. This is the impersonal modality, which Soloviev believed was characterised by abstraction and soulless universalism: general rules, a bureaucratic, technical, regulatory standardisation that crush the concrete person. Soloviev analyses this principle in his *Critique of Abstract Principles* (1880), where he denounces "abstract universalism" because this mode ignores real life and the interiority of the self. The impersonal dimension manifests itself ethically as an absence of personal relationships: if the *Other* does not exist as an irreducibly distinct entity, it makes no sense to speak of an ethical response or attitude in this case. In real life, this modality translates into passivity, alienation, and affiliation with an impersonal mechanism that obliterates faces and provides no authentic possibility of encounter. This is what a type of normativity detached from ontology and life can generate, as can an all-pervasive technical culture.

On the contrary, when the desire for *identity* prevails, the self forsakes unity thus breaking up the relationship with the *Other* in the name of its own distinctiveness. This is the individual mode that represents a reaction

¹⁸ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, New York: Henry Holt Paperbacks, 1990, Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 50th anniversary ed., New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.

against the impersonal: it is the assertion of the differentiated self. Although it risks degenerating into isolationism and self-reliance, Soloviev considers it an essential moment along the pathway to true personal growth, where autonomy opens up to communion. This modality is characterised by a clear-cut separation and lack of communication between the self and the *Other*: the *Other* becomes irremediably extraneous, and the relationship breaks down. Vladimir Soloviev explained this modality by making a distinction between the individual—as an isolated and autonomous part—and the person, intended as the whole living within the part, capable of integrating the *Other* without dissolving it.¹⁹ It is precisely to this concept of the person that *Prosopon* refers. According to Soloviev, love, which involves opening up to universality, is the only way by which to integrate individuals and overcome individualistic selfishness.

1.2 “Good” as a Personal Relational Mode

ABSTRACT

The personal mode, as "unity in diversity," is the free integration of identity and relatedness in a responsible amalgamation that enhances both the self and unity. Inspired by Soloviev's principle of all-unity, the personal mode is the only one that permits the fulfilment of the other two and is implemented as the goal of a journey characterised by an attitude—called the Prosopon Ethos—based on "thinking well of oneself and others", and which reveals the complementarity of the two drives of identity and relatedness. This perspective, oriented toward a “civilisation of love”, permits us to rediscover the human as Prosopon, that is, a relational subject within whom the maximum levels of individuation and communion combine. Here, Russian personalism provides a foundation (Berdjaev: creative freedom; Florensky: icon as openness to the Other; Bulgakov: Divine-Humanity as inclusive communion), and various European thinkers like Levinas (primacy of the face), Buber (I-Thou), Habermas (discursive ethics), and Honneth (recognition) add consonance. The ethical attitude, which is made to coincide with the Prosopon Ethos, is not imposed from above but emerges from intersubjective justification, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility. The good toward which ethics tends coincides with personal existence, which, at the same time, realises the exigencies of unity and identity.

The third modality is the *Personal*, which recognises the possibility of union between the self and the *Other* as a freely chosen bond. Here, difference is not erased, as occurs in the case of the impersonal mode, but is acknowledged and integrated into a higher unity, founded upon freedom and mutual responsibility. Far from being a "middle way" or a point of equilibrium between the other two, this modality is "unity in diversity," which simultaneously guarantees the maximum expression of individuality and a unity that is far richer than the impersonal one. A similar intuition finds a significant anticipation in the thinking of Soloviev, who, although he did not systematically theorise an autonomous category of the "personal," hinted at the possibility

¹⁹ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, trans. (edited by) Thomas R. Beyer Jr. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1985; Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. (by) Nathalie A. Duddington, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; London: T&T Clark, 2005.

of overcoming the impersonal and the individual by means of a superior kind of synthesis, which, according to him, takes the form of the idea of all-unity (всеединство/*vseedinstvo*)²⁰ conceived as a principle capable of integrating without annulling difference.

The personal mode should not be taken to mean one of three possibilities, but the full, integrated development of the other two, also the only one capable of guaranteeing the complete fulfilment of the human being. We have seen how the basis of human experience is relationship and how this is composed of two polarities: *identity* and *relatedness*. Renouncing one of these two would mean relinquishing relationship, therefore the fullness of the human experience. Indeed, if one chooses to pursue identity only, one would find oneself in a state of solitude and, in actual fact, lack the connection with the other, which is essential for authentic relationships (*the individual mode*). Likewise, if *identity* were wanting in favour of *relatedness*, the plurality of the elements that constitute relationship would be lost, so that the person would slide into pure unity as homogeneity (*the impersonal mode*). For this reason, we need to consider both the *individual* and the *impersonal* modes of relationship as being incomplete.

The apparent contradiction between these two polarities suggests that one of the two should be chosen or that it is necessary to find the proper mix. On the contrary, the quest for a mix often leads a person to fall into one of the extremes or the other and then swing back towards the opposite extreme. This is inevitable as long as we see these two kinds of desire (*relatedness and identity*) as antithetical, as if the realisation of one is an alternative to the realisation of the other. This sort of vision comes quite naturally to us as human beings: by default, we tend to adopt this approach to the interpretation of reality and live accordingly. For this reason, very often the human experience becomes an unfulfilled promise, bogged down in incomplete relationships that fall within the ambit of individual-impersonal dichotomy. In this thesis, we shall not deal with attitudes that cause us to fall into this type of relational incompleteness, since they are an immediate aspect of human experience. On the contrary, we shall try to analyse the attitude, which we believe to be properly ethical, an *ethic* that allows us to discover that *identity and relatedness* are not competing desires but each one fully realisable in the other by means of the personal mode. However, while the first two modes, *the impersonal and the individual*, generated respectively by the exclusive continuation of one of the two desires (*identity* or *relatedness*) are more immediate, the *personal mode* is the fruit of the pursuit of a pathway of progressive discovery. The fact that we can achieve our greatest potential as human beings if we adopt a certain attitude is revealed gradually. There exists, therefore, an attitude, which we call the *Prosopon Ethos*, which places us in a position where we can experience the complementarity of the desires of *relatedness and identity*.

This attitude is a veritable ethical paradigm, the one the present thesis seeks to propose. However, it is rooted in a principle: "thinking well of oneself and others." Indeed, all the typical attitudes and characteristics of the paradigm, such as the predisposition to listen and be open toward others, descend like a cascade from this

²⁰ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*, trans. (edited by) Nathalie A. Duddington, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; London: T&T Clark, 2005, (orig. 1897); Vladimir Solovyov, *Critique of Abstract Principles*, trans. (edited by) Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008, (orig. 1880–1881).

principle, which we shall analyse later. It all arises from the fact that as long as the self and the *Other* are alternatives, either I or he/she, will always be forced to renounce the self, thus entering into an *individual or impersonal* mode. However, the situation is different if the human conscience begins to entertain the healthy doubt that the encounter with the *Other* might provide an opportunity and be an enriching gift for both. In a situation like this, the relationship with the *Other* would manifest itself for what it truly is: an opportunity to emerge from solitude, enter into a mode of communion based on a free mode of involvement which allows all those taking part in it to become even more fully themselves. This way, human beings would no longer be obliged to see their desires for *identity and relatedness* as alternatives and be able to undertake that journey which allows them to enter more and more into *the personal mode of existence*. This pathway, which permits human beings to become fully themselves, that is, *Prosopa*, meaning relational beings where the individual and unitive drives are simultaneously realised in a *Civilization of Love*²¹, characterised by the unification of diversity to the enrichment of all.

From this analysis, it emerges that the achievement of the personal modality as a way of life coincides with the "good" towards which ethics, as defined by Benanti and Maffettone, is oriented, since it is through it that the human being fully realises his/her potentialities and possibilities by becoming *Prosopon*²². To elaborate on the concept of *Prosopon* and personal existence, intended as the "good" towards which ethics tends, we looked to the tradition of 20th-century Russian personalism, which, in the wake of Vladimir Soloviev, developed an original approach to the topic. An early exponent of this approach was Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), one of the most influential Russian philosophers of the 20th century, an exponent of Russian Christian personalism and existentialism. He harshly criticised Marxist materialism, placing creative freedom²³ and the value of the person as concrete expressions of the human spirit at the centre of his reflections. He championed the idea that creativity and freedom not only transcended individualism and impersonalism, but reflected the divine image found in the human being. He insisted on the creative nature of the person, opposing any objectifying reduction: the person is not a thing but a free subject who responds, creates, and transforms²⁴. Likewise, the Russian theologian, philosopher and mystic, Pavel Florenskij (1882–1937), –often known as “the Russian Leonardo da Vinci” due to the magnitude of his interests – in *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*²⁵ develops the notion of the icon as a living symbol and a window opening up onto the *Other*. Comparing the person and the icon, he sustains that the person also appears as a symbolic opening up towards and a manifestation of the presence of others, because he/she does not reduce the *Other* to an object but reveals him/her as a living mystery.

Along the same lines, we find another Russian philosopher and theologian, Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), considered one of the greatest exponents of 20th-century Orthodox theology and known for his development

²¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004.

²² We can define *Prosopon*, therefore, as the human being in whom the desires of relatedness and identity are perfectly realised.

²³ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.

²⁴ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington, San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009.

²⁵ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. (edited by) Boris Jakim, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

of sophiology, that is, the doctrine of Divine Wisdom. Bulgakov²⁶, took up the doctrine of Divine-Humanity, developed by Vladimir Soloviev, as a model of inclusive communion, within which differences were not denied but accepted and transfigured, showing that unity does not imply homogenisation but harmonious integration.

Outside of Russia, this personal view was developed and confirmed further by other contemporary European thinkers. Emmanuel Levinas, through his idea of "ethics as prime philosophy"²⁷, sustains that responsibility towards the face of the *Other* precedes any other as a rational or normative construction rooted in concrete encounters and shared human vulnerability. Even Martin Buber, in the I-Thou relationship²⁸, describes the dialogical dimension of existence as a radical alternative to the objectifying reduction of the *Other* to the status of a mere It. Even Jürgen Habermas²⁹ (1929–), one of the most influential contemporary German philosophers and sociologists, known for his theory of communicative action and for placing dialogue and rational consensus at the centre of ethics and politics, with his discursive ethics, claims that normative validity cannot be imposed from above but needs to be based on the possibility of intersubjective justification and rational understanding. Finally, Axel Honneth³⁰ (1949–), a German philosopher belonging to the Frankfurt School and one of the most significant heirs to Habermasian thinking, with his theory of recognition, holds that respect and reciprocity are not accessory elements of morality but ontological conditions of human freedom and dignity.

In light of these reflections, it is possible to claim that the *personal paradigm* constitutes an ontological, ethical, and life model where the self-other relationship, seen not as an indistinct fusion or absolute separation, but as free belonging and conscious communion, can at as the founding principle of every authentic human experience. In it we find a convergence of ontology, ethics, and life: being is relationship, and relationship is authentic life. The *personal mode of existence* consists in realising this grander type of unity where the self is fully itself precisely because it is entirely united with others because it is itself. This perspective provides not only a normative ethics, but a radical understanding of the human condition, proposing the conscious construction of a shared order founded on freedom, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility for a common good that is not imposed but discovered and embraced by all together.

²⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002.

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

²⁸ Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. London: Continuum, 2004.

²⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990; repr. 2001.

³⁰ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

1.3 The Prosopon Ethos as an Ethical Proposal

ABSTRACT

According to the redefinition of the term proposed so far, ethics means an existence oriented toward personal relationships with others, grounded in the Prosopon Ethos paradigm, a stance leading to a personal mode of existence. This gives rise to a pathway of progressive openness, centred upon "thinking well of others" and avoidance of the extremes of the impersonal and the individual: the self and the Other are neither fused nor separate, but belong to a sole relational organism. The term Prosopon indicates the person as a relational hypostasis, a concrete, unique "face". Ethos, on the other hand, delineates the posture chosen within the Onlife World that leads to the personal pathway, an alternative to swinging, pendulum-like, between absolute autonomy and impersonal annihilation and requiring the limitation of philautia (already stigmatised by both Plato and Aristotle) and the cultivation of openness, inclusion, and reciprocity. Living according to the Prosopon Ethos presents the encounter with others not as a threat but as an opportunity, a dimension within which each person becomes more fully his/herself through alliance with others. The result is an open quest grounded in living relationships and communion.

We can now go further and define ethics, in the sense of *ethos*, not only as "experience and behaviour oriented toward Good" but as "an existence, an experience oriented toward *personal relationships* with others." Similarly, ethics, in the sense of *ethikos*, can now be taken as meaning the study and thinking surrounding this personal relationship. We call this new definition of ethics the *Prosopon Ethos*, meaning simply a specific stance and attitude toward others which allows the individual to become *Prosopon* and thus adhere to the *personal mode of existence* and transform relationship into something personal (*personal mode of relation*). The attitude of the *Prosopon Ethos* is configured as a pathway involving progressive openness to others. It all begins with an inner conversion, which invites us not to rely on inherited privileges or external affiliations, but to place ourselves upon the same level as and think well of others. From this stems the willingness to share with others what we possess beyond our own needs: the progressive inclusion of others leads to perception of the needs of others as our own. This sharing also leads to a sense of justice regarding everyday relationships: we stop demanding more than we are entitled to so as not to take anything away from others. This journey culminates in fidelity to the truth we have achieved, which is not corrupted by convenience and remains steadfast even in the face of opposition. Echoing Heidegger's letter on humanism, we can say that the other is what "belongs to the human being in his essence." By welcoming and accepting others, we also welcome and accept ourselves. The attitude of the *Prosopon Ethos*, however, implies not slipping back down into the extremes of the impersonal and the individual. Therefore, it is not true that the self and the *Other* are the same indistinct thing, nor that they are two distinct realities. By adhering to this attitude, we discover that we ourselves are part of a single organism founded on *personal* relationship. The *Prosopon Ethos* is, therefore, a proposal that impacts on every dimension of human life: the personal, the communal, the political, and what we might call the deepest spiritual dimension. A more just society does not arise from formal compliance with a set of external prescriptions or the perfunctory observance of rules; nor does it arise from social conformism

that is satisfied with labels and nominal affiliations that are believed to bestow some kind of reassuring identity upon it. It is not enough that a community or society declare its formal, ideal loyalty to lofty values if it remains locked within a purely ritual and conventional "religion" such as scientism, post-humanism, formal contemporary religiosity etc., which retain all the hallmarks of a secularised religion, and therefore fail to transform relationships profoundly, and open consciousness and conscience up to authentic encounters with others. Against all and every form of external belongingness devoid of life, we need to reclaim the demand for an ethic of interior conversion, a genuine change of heart and mind, a transition from selfishness to an existence capable of radical openness and availability. This action goes beyond purely formal adherence by becoming a living experience. This is the *Prosopon Ethos*: not a matter of multiplying norms, slogans, or abstractions, but of fostering a route of authentic transformation, where the person discovers him/herself as a being who is inherently relational and called upon to participate in an encounter that transcends them. The *Prosopon* is called upon precisely to open up to the *Other*, but without falling back into the trough of the individual or impersonal mode. In the former case, people fool themselves into believing they are encountering the *Other* while they are simply projecting themselves upon the *Other*.

At this point, the analysis of the term "*Prosopon Ethos*" becomes fundamental. The term "Prosopon" stems from significant etymological and historical roots: in ancient Greek, it meant the "face" or "mask" donned by theatrical performers but in the Christian theological tradition, it assumed the technical meaning of "hypostasis," that is, concrete and unique personal existence. In the present thesis, the term is used to indicate the human as a relational being, characterised by a call to communion and mutual responsibility³¹. *Prosopon* does not describe the isolated individual or the impersonal and indistinct part of an anonymous whole, but the *face*: the concrete, historical, unique, and unrepeatable reality, capable of authentic relationships, responsibility, and mutual recognition. The term recalls *hypostasis*, as a singular and irreducible existence, always defined by openness towards the *Other*. Using the word *Prosopon* means affirming that the person is not an inaccessible atom or a faceless fragment, but a being who enters and finds her/himself in living relationships, acting to respond to the *Other*.

The word *Ethos* triggers a crucial question: what position can human beings assume within the challenges of our *Onlife World*? How should we choose to live when we recognise ourselves as part of a dynamic of relationships we are unable to ignore? Faced with this reality, human beings cannot but assume a certain position when it comes to others. All they can do is intentionally choose how and where to place themselves with regard to the *Other*. One choice is to seek union with the *Other* within the *impersonal mode of existence*, in a fusion that erases differences and dissolves identities. Otherwise, people may react by asserting themselves

³¹Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell, Brookline, MA, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007, (*orig.* 1984); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.

as isolated subjects, seeking their autonomy through self-affirmation, competition, even violence. We have already defined this second case as the *individual mode of existence*.

However, these two attitudes are frequently two sides of the same coin with each one leading easily to the *Other*. Renouncing one's authentic identity can result initially in passive submission to anonymous and impersonal systems. Later, the expression of a desire for *identity*, repressed at first, may lead to aggressive egocentrism that excludes any form of reciprocity. The same is true, conversely, when one renounces one's desire for unity. The true alternative is not to be found between these two modalities because this dichotomy—which leads persons to continually oscillate between the quest for an absolute autonomy and the temptation to annihilate themselves within the *impersonal mode of existence*—but between this dichotomy and the attempt to live a *personal mode of existence*, in free relationship with others, in mutual discovery and in concrete encounters.

Prosopon Ethos is not; therefore, a set of abstract rules or precepts imposed from without, but an ethical daily practice consistent with the ontological truth of humankind as a relational being. It is a lifestyle that proposes an *ethos* based on openness, inclusion, and the recognition of others as a condition crucial for one's own humanity; it invites us to pursue a pathway of genuine encounter with others. The *Prosopon Ethos* demands that we limit our *philautia*, that closed, defensive kind of self-love that fears losing itself in relationships with others, and rediscover the joy of giving, the possibility of engaging reciprocally with others to favour the common good. In this sense, *philautia* is the exact opposite of *Prosopon Ethics*, and has been criticised from the age of ancient philosophy on. Plato, for example, in his *Phaedrus* condemns it as a cause of deception and a lack of discernment. Similarly, Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* defines it as a malicious expression self-love, linked to egotism and the immoderate pursuit of personal advantage.

By concretely living this attitude of openness as individuals we enter into an area of authenticity that permits us to encounter others, not as obstacles or threats, but as opportunities favouring discovery. Furthermore, this attitude is capable of ensuring that we truly encounter others and become more authentically ourselves. This prospect also changes our notion of justice: our behaviour is no longer confined to simple, outward compliance with rules, but becomes an act that takes into account the singularity and uniqueness of others and ourselves, without falling into either the individualism that absolutises our own point of view or impersonalism that erases all difference. The *Prosopon Ethos* invites us to turn to others as a way of life, to pay concrete attention that translates into listening and acceptance, to recognise that "there is more joy in giving than in receiving."³² In this sense, living ethically is not simply about respecting the rules, on the contrary it means continually checking lest we slip into selfish isolation or impersonal isolation while remaining genuinely open to encounters with others. Only in this way can we answer the question that human beings have always asked themselves: *Who are we?*

³²Acts 20:35 (ESV-CE)

The *Prosopon Ethos* presents itself as a prerequisite for a journey towards self-knowledge and understanding of others.

The *Prosopon Ethos* does not claim to possess the truth of the human being in definitive or unbending forms, but acknowledges it as the aim of an open quest, built on the concrete experience of encounters, on living relationships and communion with others.

Chapter 2 - The Onlife World

2.1 Langdon Winner's lesson

ABSTRACT

*Having outlined this new paradigm, we shall now show that the choice between the *Prosopon Ethos* and individual-impersonal alternatives not only impacts upon the individual, but shapes the entire socio-cultural order: the culture of the Onlife World is comprised of artefacts that reflect such ways of existence and relationship. To demonstrate this, we draw on Langdon Winner's "lesson" where the case of Moses's low bridges exemplifies the idea that technology is not neutral, but how it embodies values and imposes a certain degree of social order. In line with Winner's thesis, the "empirical-turn" school translates and reinforces this insight: Borgmann demonstrates how devices remould practices and cultures; Feenberg shows how technical systems embody values; Ihde clarifies the notion of the techno-phenomenological mediation of experience. STS and infrastructural studies (Jasanoff, Star, Edwards), on the other hand, confirm Winner's thesis, empirically, by demonstrating how projects and networks stabilise political values, roles, and hierarchies. Finally, Bowker & Star, Friedman & Nissenbaum (*Value Sensitive Design*), Elish (*moral crumple zones*), and Benjamin & Noble extend these reflections to comprise the digital world and demonstrate how algorithms and platforms codify and reproduce biases and power structures. It follows that applied ethics (digital, economic, corporate) are reflections of a broader ethical culture: their orientation depends on contextual values and assumed modes of existence.*

History confirms Winner's theory of technique/technology as an instrument of power (Wittfogel; Mumford; Foucault; and today, widespread surveillance: Zuboff), and this is also true of the digital age, defined by Floridi as the "Fourth Revolution".

Having defined this new ethical paradigm, we wish to demonstrate that the consequences of choosing between the approach of the *Prosopon Ethos* and individual-impersonal alternatives can not only influence the life of the individual but also shape the entire socio-cultural landscape. To affirm this, we will demonstrate how *Onlife* culture and all its by-products are *artefacts*, that is, products of the human being.

In order to address this issue critically, we shall avail ourselves of the idea of Langdon Winner (1944-), US philosopher of technology and professor at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and we will broaden the theoretical horizons of his teaching to favour an analysis of the dynamics specific to the so-called *Onlife World*³³. This perspective permits a foregrounding of the common challenges that digital ethics shares with other areas of applied ethics, economics and enterprise, for example, and shows that these different domains do not constitute autonomous and self-sufficient ethical systems, but may be configured, rather, as reflections of a broader ethical culture specific to a given society. In this sense, the argument is that the quality and

³³ Floridi, *Onlife Manifesto*

orientation of the responses of applied ethics depend decidedly on the values and representations that inform cultural contexts and, ultimately, on the *modes of existence* adopted by human beings.

Langdon Winner teaches us³⁴ that certain architectures and artefacts are capable of imposing a particular order upon society. In his well-known work *Do Artifacts have Politics?* Winner avails himself of examples to support his thesis. One of the most celebrated instances regards Robert Moses's choice³⁵ to see to it that the Long Island bridges were low. These bridges were deliberately built lower than three metres so that buses might not pass under them. The idea was to prevent the poorer sectors of the population from entering the beaches reserved for the more affluent. This was clearly a political project which availed itself of technology to establish a certain kind of social order and which, later, became independent of those who had created it. In fact, even if, hypothetically speaking, political governance were to change and become more favourable to the poorest members of society, the low bridges would still continue their discriminatory work. The only solution capable of altering the social order imposed by those low bridges would have been, therefore, to demolish and replace them or modify them substantially. This example was used by Winner to illustrate a dynamic that concerned not only a specific technology, but also "many technical devices and systems [which are] important in everyday life" and which, in keeping with his thesis, "contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity". In short, what emerges from Winner's pioneering analysis is that technology is not neutral; on the contrary, it often incorporates precise cultural and ethical values that then reproduce and strengthen its action and thus impact upon the way of life of people. So, the outcome is a two-fold movement: on the one hand, technology incorporates values and ethics derived from society, on the other, it imposes a certain order on society or reinforces it.

Another element highlighted by Winner is that the rapport between power and the awareness among people regarding the role of technology in the configuration of the social order, is asymmetric. This means that it is the dominant groups that often determine the values incorporated into the technology used and the social order imposed using the technology itself.

In reality, Winner's is only one of the contributions made towards what has been called the "empirical turn" in the philosophy of technology, a turn in which Albert Borgmann, Andrew Feenberg, Don Ihde, among others, have taken part. Their contributions marked a turning point in the understanding of technique-technology when it came to other views, like the classical view and the critical theory. Within this ambit, Albert Borgmann³⁶ (1937–2023), philosopher of technology at the University of Montana, proposed the notion of the *device paradigm* to describe how technological devices are not simply neutral tools, but one capable of altering culture and everyday practices profoundly. Andrew Feenberg (1943–) ³⁷, a Canadian philosopher, developed

³⁴ Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 121–136

³⁵ Robert Moses (1888–1981), known as New York's 'master builder', was a powerful and highly controversial urban planner who reshaped New York City.

³⁶ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

³⁷ Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited*, 2nd ed. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

a critical theory of technology, arguing that technical systems embody social values and can be rethought in a more democratic manner. Don Ihde (1934–2024)³⁸, a US philosopher and founder of post-phenomenology, demonstrated how technologies constantly mediate our experience of the world, transforming the way we perceive reality and relate to it. Together, these authors consolidated the “empirical turn,” directing the philosophy of technology toward a more concrete approach, attentive to lived experience and its social implications³⁹.

From their perspective

Technique-technology becomes a way of relating between man and reality capable of shaping and, at least in part, determine both: reality is shaped efficaciously and efficiently by man according to his wishes and with the power of technique, at the same time, the technological artifacts mediate the reality, predetermine which aspect of reality becomes perceptible to the person and in which way.⁴⁰

This empirical approach to the phenomenon of technique-technology helps us show how the problem of the ethics of technology, including digital technology, has its roots in an anthropological question. In particular,

The contribution of the empirical turn, then, directs us towards the need for a governance of technological innovation. The ethical reflection and the reflection on the world of technology have the task not just of determining the a priori limits for the development and the use of technological artefacts, but rather posing questions on the sense of the human in the world of technique⁴¹

Much of the subsequent literature has substantially confirmed and rendered Winner's analysis quantitative, particularly in fields such as STS and infrastructural studies. Scholars such as Jasanoff, Star and Edwards have explored ways in which technological projects and infrastructures can incorporate political values and reinforce social hierarchies. Sheila Jasanoff⁴² (1944–), a teacher at STS Harvard, has demonstrated how science and technology are profoundly intertwined with values and forms of governance. Susan Leigh Star (1954–2010)⁴³, another US sociologist, introduced the concept of "boundary objects" and studied how infrastructures shape social relations and systems of power.

Paul N. Edwards⁴⁴ (1954–), a historian of science and technology, has kept account of and related the construction of climate knowledge infrastructures, demonstrating that large technological projects incorporate political choices and epistemic structures.

Furthermore, other scholars have enlarged on Winner's approach enabling it to embrace the digital world and AI, thus confirming the idea that digital technology is by no means neutral, but reflects social interests and

³⁸ Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990.

³⁹ Paolo Benanti, *Homo Faber. La condizione tecno-umana*, Bologna, EDB, 2018, chap. 4.

⁴⁰ Benanti, *Homo Faber*.

⁴¹ Benanti, *Homo Faber*, chap. 4.

⁴² Sheila Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁴³ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1999.

⁴⁴ Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2010.

values, often those of dominant groups, and, moreover, that it serves to strengthen a certain social and political order. Among the most significant contributions, as far as discussions of the digital world is concerned, we hasten to mention: Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, in *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (1999), who reveal how IT infrastructures and digital classification systems codify social values, reflecting the interests and assumptions of those who have the power to define them; Batya Friedman and Helen Nissenbaum, with their *Value Sensitive Design* (2000 and after), which stems from the observation that digital systems already incorporate values that are frequently not discussed or shared democratically, making it mandatory to render these values explicit and question them to prevent design from reinforcing hierarchies and inequalities; Madeleine Clare Elish (2019), with the concept of *Moral Crumple Zones*, which studies how AI systems distribute responsibility in order to protect companies and offload risks onto the shoulders of the weakest users, thus reflecting cultural and organisational priorities; Ruha Benjamin, with *Race After Technology* (2019), shows how algorithms and digital systems embody and perpetuate racial prejudices, reflecting social hierarchies of power; and, finally, Safiya Umoja Noble, and her *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), which analyses how the design choices of search engines reflect commercial interests and cultural biases, consolidating forms of oppression and marginalisation.

All told, Winner's remains a conflictual interpretative scheme, bearing within it the notion of the existence of a struggle between social groups for the control of symbolic and material resources. The idea underscoring this approach is that the dominant classes who have greater resources and greater access to and possession of knowledge hold power. They use technology as a tool capable of consolidating and perpetuating their dominion, as, in a certain sense, has always been the case. Power, in fact, has always used technical know-how and means, more recently technology⁴⁵ as instruments of oppression and imposition of order, all of which have varied and continue to vary according to historical context. From the dawn of history, the construction of monumental works and complex infrastructures has favoured the centralisation of command and the management of collective resources. It has been observed, for example, how large hydraulic works have given centralised control to despotic irrigation societies, according to Wittfogel's well-known hypothesis⁴⁶, or how the technical evolution of cities and production systems has generated and fostered the formation of increasingly complex hierarchies⁴⁷. In modern times, the industrial revolution, with its mechanisation of production and rationalisation of labour introduced new forms of discipline of bodies and behaviour, transforming the factory into a model of organisation and social control.⁴⁸ Nowadays, digital technologies and surveillance systems exercise widespread supervision of information and behaviour thus redefining power

⁴⁵ Here technology is intended as technique which becomes systematic, scientifically organised, oriented towards mass production and calculated efficiency (this is the author's own paraphrase, drawing on concepts developed in Lewis Mumford's "Technics and Civilization" and Jacques Ellul's "The Technological Society.")

⁴⁶ Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988), German historian and sinologist, a naturalised US citizen, developed the theory of "hydraulic despotism", arguing that, in ancient civilisations, large irrigation systems favoured the concentration of political power and the birth of authoritarian state structures. Cfr. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1957.

⁴⁷ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trad. (edited by) Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1977.

relations, while being able to influence choices and wishes⁴⁹. From this brief reconstruction it emerges how in every historical era and in every geographical region technology has been modelled on the exigencies of power, becoming a privileged means by which to govern the environment and, through it, collective and individual action.

However, ease of access to power has changed undeniably over the last few centuries when liberal democracy in the West, has come quite close to the implementation of what John Rawls (1921–2002), one of the twentieth-century's most influential philosophers, calls *fair equality of opportunity*⁵⁰. According to this principle the conditions at birth of each human being should not determine *a priori* the outcome of his/her competitive potential with others. This result was achieved through the reduction of economic inequality and an increase in social mobility⁵¹. However, the end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st have seen a reversal of the previous trend with a considerable increase in levels of inequality in Western countries⁵² and consequential social fractures that struggle to mend.

The new century has brought with it an even more gigantic novelty: the affirmation of what many scholars have named the greatest revolution in the history of humanity, the *Digital Revolution*. Among these intellectuals we find Luciano Floridi, calls it the Fourth Revolution, after those of Copernicus, Darwin and Freud, considering it the most transformative of them all⁵³. As this new age is still only dawning, it is impossible to grasp the full scope and the implications of what is happening.

2.2 The dark side of the Onlife World

ABSTRACT

This analysis of the dark side of the Onlife World shows how digital systems, which, far from being neutral, embody values and impose social order, render hierarchies and control mechanisms pervasive. The infrastructures that support the Onlife World—designed and governed within specific historical and cultural contexts—shape behaviours, restrict choices, and reflect the intentions of elitist groups. This reflection is explored here by referring to Bodei, Bauman, and Quintarelli. Bodei denounces "capitalismo algoritmico" as a pervasive system of mediation that induces cultural regression, concentrates knowledge-power, and manipulates desires and preferences. Bauman describes "liquid surveillance" as the internalisation of discipline (from panopticon to synopticon), voluntary servitude, "no one's responsibility," and processes of commodification of the Other. Finally, Quintarelli analyses "capitalismo immateriale" and "infoplutocrazia" warning against the risk of centralised control of data and information processes that crystallize structures resistant to change.

⁴⁹ Shoshana Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, trad. (edited by) Paolo Bassotti, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2019.

⁵⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 73.

⁵¹ World Inequality Database (WID), "Data," accessed August 23, 2025, <https://wid.world/data/>

⁵² Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁵³ Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution*.

For a “Winnerian” analysis of contemporary society, it is necessary, first of all, to affirm that if, on the one hand, digital systems may increase human progress, on the other, they can be exploited as instruments of power capable of imposing an unfair social order. The dynamics of the digital is not all that different from what Winner described and therefore may be seen as possessing the same characteristics. From this perspective, contemporary capitalism can be analysed through a Winnerian lens and seen as a sociotechnical system that embeds, enforces, and amplifies specific forms of power and social order by exploiting technological infrastructures that are anything but neutral. In the *Onlife World* described by Floridi, these dynamics become even more pervasive and inescapable. The infrastructures that sustain the *Onlife* condition are designed in ways that impose specific forms of social and political order, enforcing or favouring hierarchies and structures of control. They are also deliberately employed by political and economic elites to consolidate and maintain that order, model patterns of behaviour, restrict choices, and reinforce systems of dominance on an unprecedented scale. Finally, they reflect and incorporate cultural values, intentions, and visions since they are always conceived, built, and maintained within specific historical and cultural contexts.

As Remo Bodei (1938–2019), one of Italy’s most important contemporary philosophers, shows in his analysis of the *capitalismo algoritmico*⁵⁴, the pervasive mediation of algorithms produces what he calls cultural regression, drying up the faculty of critical judgment by subordinating it to dominant marketing logics and pre-formatted ideas that limit citizens' awareness and participation in political and cultural life. He also highlights the concentration of knowledge-power in the hands of governmental, financial, and technological elites, who use privileged access to data and algorithms to maintain the rest of society in a state of ignorance and subjection to pre-packaged opinions. According to Bodei, algorithms are not neutral but means that intentionally pursue specific interests and ideologies programmed by their designers, shaping the mentality and choices of billions of people, both as consumers and voters. These dynamic risks undermining personal freedom by systematically intercepting and reshaping desires and inclinations, leaving individuals exposed to external manipulation and reducing them to what he calls an “open pit mine” of exploitable data profiles. He warns us that this condition creates a profound dilemma about truth itself, recalling Plato’s idea that truth emerges only from dialogue and confrontation—a process threatened when power structures engineer consensus from above through profiling and manipulation, resulting in what Bodei terms a “democratic emergency”.

Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of *Liquid Surveillance*⁵⁵ complements this perspective by showing how contemporary surveillance infrastructures impose new social orders while naturalizing market-driven hierarchies. Bauman (1925–2017) a Polish-born naturalised British sociologist and philosopher, is known for his analysis of “liquid modernity,” that is, of a social condition marked by instability, flexibility, and precariousness. In his later work, he applied this category to the field of surveillance, highlighting how systems

⁵⁴ Remo Bodei, *Dominio e sottomissione. Schiavi, animali, macchine, intelligenza artificiale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019.

⁵⁵ Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* Cambridge, Polity, 2013.

of digital control and constant monitoring intertwine with market logic, normalising new forms of social hierarchy. He retains that consumption no longer satisfies needs but commodifies the consumer, who becomes a sellable product shaped by fear of inadequacy and the tools provided for self-fabrication. Drawing upon Étienne de la Boétie's notion of voluntary servitude, Bauman observes that modern individuals internalise surveillance, carrying their own personal panopticons on their bodies, and highlights the emergence of the *synopticon*, where discipline is internalised and individuals bear the costs of their own management. He argues that technological development is often driven by means rather than ends, warning that we no longer develop tools for what we want to do, but, instead, do things simply because the technology exists. This disengages moral reflection and responsibility, leading to what Bauman, referring to George Orwell⁵⁶, describes as the "responsibility of nobody". He also addresses the crisis of agency that results when power evaporates from the state into global technological systems, leaving individuals with impossible burdens of individualisation and a pervasive sense of helplessness. At the same time, he insists on the need for utopian thinking and anti-dogmatism, asking us to question what seems inevitable and recall that the human being is more than data—a crucial reminder in a world where surveillance reduces bodies to informational commodities and enables a process of adiaphorisation, in which moral responsibility is neutralised through technical mediation. Bauman warns against the dehumanisation of the *Other*, who is transformed from a moral subject into a commodity, and calls for a new ethics of the *Other* that resists such objectification.

Stefano Quintarelli's analysis of *capitalismo immateriale*⁵⁷ adds further depth to this *Onlife* critique, warning us of a threat to democracy rooted in the tension between will and momentary desire, where technological systems exploit the distinction between surface and in-depth human intentions. Quintarelli (1965–) an expert in digital technologies has played a central role in IT innovation in Italy. He describes the emergence of an "infoplutocracy," based on centralised control of data and the processes by which they are collected, processed, and exploited. Quintarelli underscores the conflict existing between centralised and decentralised information management models, showing how dominant actors, to maintain power and resist change,³ avail themselves of the former. He advocates measures such as new forms of taxation, welfare innovation, worker protection, consumer rights, greater competition, interoperability, and user contestability³. Looking to the future, he calls for regulatory norms that treat data as a negotiable and portable proprietary right, enabling pro-competitive market structures while safeguarding privacy³. He emphasises the importance of "awareness as freedom," rooted in both cultural education and technical skills, as well as the need for transparency in dealings with consumers and a dialogic relationship between companies and users such as to foster ethical data use in alignment with human well-being and self-understanding³.

⁵⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London, Penguin Classics, 2021.

⁵⁷ Stefano Quintarelli, *Capitalismo immateriale. Le tecnologie digitali e il nuovo conflitto sociale*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2019.

2.3 The opportunities provided by the Onlife World

ABSTRACT

At this point the thesis presents some political-administrative countermeasures, including innovative forms of taxation and welfare, worker and consumer protection, portable data rights, and a cultural and technical educational project, such as to permit us to seize the opportunities offered by the Onlife World and counteract the consequences it produces. However, these interventions make sense only within the regulatory framework of the Prosopon Ethos. This leads, actually, to a reshaping of artefacts and a type of governance that restores primacy to personal relationships, thus countering objectification and orienting the Onlife ecosystem toward the relational common good.

If up to this point we have critically analysed the most controversial aspects of contemporaneity, it is equally necessary to explore the opportunities provided by the *Onlife* approach; opportunities capable of creating a more equitable social order. *Onlife* is also a space where we can rethink socio-technical architectures, design infrastructures capable of incentivising ethical behaviour, promoting awareness and democratising access to knowledge⁵⁸. To achieve these goals, a pro-competitive regulation of digital markets is crucial: a set of norms which extend the principles of the protection of competition to the data economy and are capable of producing irreversible structural changes. The definition of negotiable, alienable and portable property rights over data should permit, for example, the identification of distinct relevant markets and promote more open competition, while safeguarding privacy.⁵⁹ Furthermore, in keeping with this perspective, boosting levels of awareness transmitted through education might increase the freedom of people. Within this context education should be seen as a means capable of fostering cultural and human growth and increasing knowledge and awareness of the technical and professional skills required in order to act and work in the *Onlife World*. Digital tools should favour large-scale access to personalised, low-cost, continuous training, which is a condition fundamental for human and professional fulfilment in the current flexible labour market⁶⁰. This educational and training strategy is also one of the most potent weapons that people can avail themselves of to fight the inequality, unemployment and discontent generated by digitalisation and automation. With citizens endowed with greater awareness, political choices might be oriented towards taxing platform owners and using this income to fund the education of those who have been excluded from the benefits of technological progress. These political choices, both individual and collective, ought to stimulate more ethical uses of data while reconciling profit and consumer well-being. Dialogue between companies and consumers is also essential if one is to reach an understanding of the real needs of both and build long-term relationships, while guaranteeing that users maintain control of their data. *Onlife Education* might thus foster increasingly advanced forms of e-learning,

⁵⁸ Luciano Floridi, *Il verde e il blu. Idee ingenue per migliorare la politica*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2020.

⁵⁹ Marco Delmastro and Antonio Nicita, *Big data. Come stanno cambiando il nostro mondo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019.

⁶⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2020*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2020.

complementary to in-person training, i.e. integrated courses that exploit the advantages of distance learning and innovative approaches such as gamification, constituting a first step towards increasingly complete and personalised training. Transparency towards consumers is also complementary to education: the consumer must be able to understand and choose consciously, and the law needs to verify the accuracy of the information.⁶¹.

All these proposals and opportunities can bear the greatest fruits if they are part of a change in the ways humanity lives. This change would be the natural consequence of the birth of an *ethos*, which we have called the *Prosopon Ethos* here. This is an ethic that places the human person at the centre, not as an isolated individual, but as a *Prosopon* — face, relationship, responsibility and openness to others⁶². The *Prosopon Ethos* is based on a vision of the person as a concrete, hypostatic existence, shaped by relationships rather than autonomous existence⁶³. How could we imagine, for example, a healthy dialogue between companies and consumers or more ethical uses of data, without a change in people's ways of life? Companies, consumers, organisations are simply people who come together, unite, create, produce and relate to each other. The outcome of the constitution of all social structures and relationships depends precisely on the way in which these people conduct their relational existences. Education in this new ethical paradigm would contribute to the development of a social, economic, political life mode permitting people to develop their personalities and professionalism fully.

2.4 Ethics and Culture as Artefacts, Artefacts as Expressions of Human Behaviour

ABSTRACT

The diagnosis of the current state of the Onlife World carried out so far confirms the effectiveness of the three dimensions hypothesised by Winner, while focusing on the third: culture as a set of artefacts that embody values and social order. The argument proceeds by proposing an extension of the notion of artefact to include not only technical objects but also intangible elements like shared customs, practices, and rules (hard/soft law), symbols, and language. It follows that applied ethics are also artefacts. This provides a framework whereby culture is considered as a symbolic-material macro-artefact expressed in multiple micro-artefacts, integrated into a single historically situated sphere. To arrive at this definition, we draw on Feenberg's analysis, which shows that "technical codes" reflect power and values, and on socio-material studies (Orlikowski, Latour), which highlight how meanings and effects emerge from an interweave of the design and practices of use. The definition is strengthened further by drawing on the work of Searle, who sustains,

⁶¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, trad. (edited by) Paolo Bassotti Roma: Luiss University Press, 2019.

⁶² Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

⁶³ Buber, *I and Thou*.

availing himself of the notion of collective intentionality, that institutions and status-functions are social artefacts, and Benanti, who proposes language as the primary expression of technology and, more generally, humans as beings mediated by artefacts. Finally, the contributions of Geertz and Schein complete the picture: Geertz by presenting culture as a set of "programmes" that guide action, Schein by considering codes, policies, and procedures as artefacts. While they can produce unforeseen effects, artefacts remain expressions of the "human essence": therefore, technical design and norms reflect a mode of existence and relationship. The *Prosoption Ethos* is rooted in this basic assumption, upon which culture and applied ethics have been shown to depend.

The analysis carried out to this point confirms that even in the *Onlife World* the three *Winnerian dimensions* remain fully operative: first, technological artefacts impose specific forms of social and political order; second, they can be deliberately used by power to consolidate and maintain existing structures of authority; and third, they reflect and incorporate cultural values, intentions, and visions, expressing not neutral or universal truths, but socially embedded and contested choices. This thesis will now go on to focus on the last of these three *Winnerian dimensions*: culture.

Up to here, it appears evident that the dynamics of digital systems is not so very different from that Winner used to refer to technology in general: even the artefacts of the *Onlife* era incorporate values, political choices and power relations. But this logic can be extended even further: it does not concern only the artefacts themselves, but also the way in which we use them and the procedures we apply to regulate them ethically (hard law and soft law). This permits us to understand how *applied ethics* itself is an artefact. In this regard, one of the greatest contemporary philosophers, an expert in the philosophy of technology, Andrew Feenberg, holds that technologies are never neutral, because "technical codes" and design reflect social values and power relations and, furthermore, that uses and practices of appropriation are able to reproduce or transform these logics.⁶⁴ The literature of socio-materiality, as developed by Wanda Orlikowski (a scholar of organisational studies and technology at MIT) and inspired by thinkers like Bruno Latour (a French sociologist and philosopher, co-developer of the Actor-Network Theory), shows how the meaning and effects of technology emerge not only from design but also from everyday use and social practices. More in general, our way of relating to all practices and phenomena of technical nature is closely intertwined with the culture that characterises a certain society. The perspective of socio-materiality, takes a step further in this direction, showing that material objects, uses, practices and meanings are human products, therefore *artefacts*, and are not separable from each other but constitute a single socio-technical fabric that we might also call an "artefact".

The term *artefact* indicates

an object designed or fashioned by a specific human activity, which did not exist before that activity and that cannot be understood independently from the human activity in which it is utilized and for which it was, at least in part, conceived.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Andrew Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁶⁵ Benanti, *Homo Faber*, chap. 1.

The term “artefacts” usually refers to technical objects or purposefully designed infrastructures, but here we suggest deliberately extending the definition. An artefact, in a broader sense, includes not only what is physically built, but also practices, rules, institutions and shared meanings, intended as the results of collective processes of creation, attribution of functions and construction of meaning. These dimensions are not simple, “natural facts”, but exist and persist precisely because they are contrived, maintained and transformed by social and historical action.

Particularly illuminating, from this viewpoint, is the work of the US philosopher John Roger Searle (1932-), one of the greatest scholars of the philosophy of language, mind and social matters. In *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), he holds that social institutions emerge thanks only to our collective intentionality and the ability to attribute functions and status to them.⁶⁶ These entities, defined as social artefacts, depend on our linguistic-performative agreement and on a sharing community that bestows meaning, power, and durability on them: social institutions are, therefore, for Searle, social objects that exist upon the planes of language and shared intention. Assuming this broader perspective, Benanti has foregrounded some recent developments within the realm of the cognitive sciences that have confirmed and provided evidence that the human condition is mediated by artefacts, both in the sense of tools and representations, and has gone so far as to argue that language itself is the first expression of human technology. This theme is central in the book *La grande invenzione. Il linguaggio come tecnologia dalle pitture rupestri al GPT-3* (2021), (the great invention: language as technology from cave paintings to GPT-3) where Benanti argues that “language is the first true technology” of humanity⁶⁷, capable of enabling the transmission of meaning, the construction of symbolic worlds, the amplification of our presence in the world and allowing the creation of infinite sentences from a finite repertoire of sounds and the communication of invisible realities. An ulterior, fundamental analytical lens is provided by one of the most authoritative cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century, Clifford Geertz, who argued that culture itself is a set of “programmes” or “instructions” collectively constructed to guide human behaviour by configuring shared ways of making sense of the world.

Following Geertz, this thesis proposes interpreting culture as a *symbolic-material* artefact, something Geertz never actually did. However, his conception clearly implies that culture is neither a natural given nor a simple sum of external behaviour patterns, but the result of a historical and collective process of the construction of meaning. It is rooted in symbols, languages, and shared practices that human communities develop, transmit, and transform over time. Culture may be configured, therefore, as a system of rules, interpretative models and conceptual structures that act as mechanisms used to orient individual and collective action. These socially developed mechanisms perform a structuring and regulatory function: they provide people with shared cognitive and behavioural maps, enabling them to understand the world, manage uncertainty and build stable forms of coexistence. In this sense, culture acts as a collective memory, as a collective symbolic device, a

⁶⁶ John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Free Press, 1995.

⁶⁷ Paolo Benanti, *La grande invenzione. Il linguaggio come tecnologia, dalle pitture rupestri al GPT-3* Cinisello Balsamo (MI), Edizioni San Paolo, 2021.

veritable artefact, which guides experience and shapes social reality, bestowing communicative and organisational coherence upon daily life.⁶⁸

Now, if we accept, as we have argued above, that culture is a collective, symbolic-material artefact, then, we can also consider the normative and ethical artefacts that derive from it—public ethics, digital ethics, or corporate ethics—as micro-artefacts. These are symbolic and practical structures that, while operating at specific levels, transpose and apply the shared symbolic structure—culture—within concrete contexts. This is confirmed by the research of Edgar H. Schein⁶⁹, psychologist and founding father of studies of organisational culture. Although he adopts a narrower concept of artefact than the one adopted here, he considers organisational codes, norms, and practices as artefacts. According to his model, therefore, ethical codes, corporate policies and procedures constitute operational components of culture, embodying shared values and assumptions and guiding actual patterns of behaviour. Schein actually includes two other levels of organisational culture beyond artefacts: declared values (principles and mission) and deeply internalised core assumptions. However, we can also include these two other levels in the expanded notion of artefact we have opted for here. In short, within this theoretical framework, culture may be seen as a symbolic-material and collective macro-artefact, containing multiple micro-artefacts (including public ethics and all applied ethics, from digital and AI ethics to economic and business ethics), which constitute its operational and functional expressions. Language, technologies, social institutions, ethical systems, communicative and normative practices do not represent autonomous or overlapping realities, but are configured as components, integral to a single cultural weave, historically situated and shared. They contribute to the production and stabilisation of meanings, the orientation of individual and collective action, as well as the symbolic and organizational coherence of forms of human coexistence.

All this leads, ultimately, back to the foundational role of the human being, intended as a subject capable of attributing meanings, establishing functions, generating symbols, and constructing shared worlds: it is humankind, in fact, thanks to its intentional and relational action, that constitutes and transforms the world of artefacts, enabling culture as a symbolic and structured space of experience to take form. Therefore, to arrive at the root of the matter, we have moved from micro-artefacts to the macro-artefact of culture, and from there to the human being.

Yet, the link between human beings and artefacts is not linear or unidirectional at all. Artefacts do not limit themselves to carrying out conscious individual intentions, but, once produced, they end up by shaping social relations, institutions and even our very conception of humanity.⁷⁰ Furthermore, many artefacts are not the outcome of a single and immediate wilful decision, but a blend of collective and historical processes, that sediment within them various visions of the world, values and balances of power.

⁶⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973.

⁶⁹ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1985.

⁷⁰ Feenberg, *Critical Theory of Technology*.

However, the fact that artefacts can give rise to autonomous or unforeseen effects does not cancel their nature as human products. They remain historical and cultural expressions of how human beings understand and live out their life⁷¹, thus, their mode of existence.

Therefore, even the design of artefacts, including digital infrastructures and AI technologies and the ethics that regulate them, always reflects a certain *mode of existence*. In this regard, Paolo Benanti argues that

The path of reflection that we have gone along allows us to understand how the technological artifact and the world of technology from an anthropological standpoint are to be understood as a crystallizing in history of a human *quid*. It is unthinkable to reduce the artifacts to its mere technical utilization or a device oriented to its mere technical efficiency. In themselves, the artifacts and technology give an answer structured in time of man to the world, actually they present as a saying of man about the world and of the world⁷²

In this excerpt, Benanti refers to technological artefacts, but the same notion might be extended to embrace a broader notion of *artefact*, like that mentioned previously. Therefore, we can claim that the *human quid* lies at the root of all artefacts, even of those that are non-technological. Benanti, in another work, defined culture as an "amalgam of artefacts supported by people's values and experiences that contain profound and, sometimes, unconscious elements shared by the group itself⁷³ and as an "expression of humans and their attitude when dealing with the finitude and radicality of human existence"⁷⁴. Here too the reference is to material artefacts but, for the reasons mentioned above, immaterial ones shall also be included here.

This human attitude toward life about which Benanti writes, can coincide with the new notion of ethics characteristic of the *Prosopon Ethos* explored in the previous chapter. With this excursus, we have demonstrated how the culture and applied ethics of a society depend precisely on this fundamental human attitude toward life.

⁷¹ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

⁷² Benanti, *Homo Faber*, chap. 4.

⁷³ Paolo Benanti, *Digital Age. Teoria del cambio d'epoca. Persona, famiglia e società*, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), Edizioni San Paolo, 2020, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Benanti, *Digital Age*, p. 15.

Chapter 3 - Towards Universal Public Ethics

3.1 The Aim of the *Prosopon Ethos*: a Personal Society

ABSTRACT

The final part of this thesis wishes to outline the characteristics of a universal public ethics, founded not upon rules and conventions but upon the ontological choice of pursuing the *Prosopon Ethos* as the pathway towards a personal mode of existence. By universality here is meant a condition of dialogue, recognition, and peaceful coexistence, one capable of also encompassing the transcendent dimension and individual morality, which, according to Benanti and Maffettone, were overlooked by Habermas and Rawls. Within the *Prosopon Ethos* paradigm, the distinction between individual morality and public ethics is theoretically blurred: the concept of public ethics is extended to include the "morality of artefacts," and the ethical level of a society is attributed to the human factor. Furthermore, "good" and "just" converge: the encounter with otherness is constitutive of the good. Then, a historical reading is provided, highlighting the limitations of individualistic models (primacy of the good of individuals), impersonal models (for example Soviet Communism: repression of freedom), and capitalism, which combine individual and impersonal drives without resolving their contradiction. The ideal society is a personal one where the *Prosopon Ethos* becomes a shared habitus and artefacts are "personalised" so that the needs for identity and relatedness are realized together, aligning both the individual and the common good.

On the basis of what has been discussed so far, can we imagine a universal public ethic, such as that hoped for by Maffettone and Benanti in *Noi e la macchina*. The root of a universal public ethic cannot be a set of rules or an abstract and neutral procedure, but an ontological choice relating to our mode of existence as human beings. It is not sufficient to establish what is right; we need to question who we are, who we want to be and how we can relate to one another. By recognising and promoting *Prosopon Ethos* as the way to the *personal mode of existence*, we can aspire to a form of universality: not as an imposition of functional content, but as a condition favouring dialogue, mutual recognition, and peaceful coexistence. This universal public ethic, if built upon these bases, would be capable also of embracing even the transcendent and individual morality, which, according to Benanti and Maffettone, are issues not dealt with by Habermas e Rawls⁷⁵.

The dissemination of this ethical culture should have as its precise goal this inner conversion, this openness oriented toward a personal mode of encounter. In this sense, every community that strives to preserve an authentic bond needs to be demanding, on the one hand, enabling people to develop sincere orientation toward openness, on the other, it favours a type of inclusiveness requiring responsibility and acceptance as a universal way of life. This attitude permits human beings to flourish in communion. In short, it demands a radical

⁷⁵ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 93.

willingness to participate in a way of life that recognises others and allows oneself to be transformed by the encounter with them. It is within this space of freedom, relationship, and exploration that the deepest truth of humanity is revealed and a new, more just and more humane mode of communal living can be born.

The main reason for examining the impact of human behaviour on culture as a whole, is to show how, in the definition of ethics advanced here, any clear distinction between individual morality and public ethics loses meaning. Indeed, having accepted that the prime structure of existence is relationship, it makes no sense to separate the destiny of individual human beings from that of their community and the human community as a whole, especially within a deeply and thoroughly interconnected world like *Onlife*. Therefore, in proposing the *Prosopon Ethos* as a new definition of ethics, we have chosen to make no distinction between subjective morality and public ethics, which, according to Benanti and Maffettone, are the two facets of ethics. Furthermore, we propose extending the definition of public ethics, intended not only as the morality of institutions, but also as the morality of all artefacts (in the broadest sense of the term "artefact," a point already explored above). From this perspective, the degree of ethicality of a given society will depend on two conditions: the moral behaviour of the individuals it contains and the ethical nature of its *artefacts*. However, since, as already affirmed, *artefacts* are human products, everything depends on the human factor. This explains why the *Prosopon Ethos* could be a valid response to both individual morality and public ethics. This paradigm would permit the integration of these two dimensions because its adoption would concern not only individual moral action, but by becoming a shared practice, it would be able to influence the entire cultural spectrum, bestowing on it and on all its by-products a "personal" imprint.

Here we arrive at a point where it is worth our while to question the ultimate purpose of any kind of ethical reflection. It is important to understand how different the goal of the *Prosopon Ethos* is from the goals of other ethical paradigms. If we extend Benanti and Maffettone's definition of *ethos* ("a life experience oriented toward good") to society on the whole, then an ethical society becomes one that strives toward the common good. Here, the perennial problem of defining the common good, meaning the good of all, arises.

Habermas and Rawls proposed a solution to this problem by making a distinction between right and good. While the latter corresponds to the subjective morality of the individual, the former indicates "that subset of politically relevant ethical values regarding which everyone should agree."⁷⁶ The first limitation of this approach, identified by Benanti and Maffettone in *Noi e la macchina*, is its failure to address the issue of individual morality, seeing that their considerations focus on the foundations of liberal democracy and public ethics. This shortcoming is even more problematic when it comes to the need to address contemporary issues, if we intend public ethics solely as the morality of institutions. Indeed, in this case, Habermas's and Rawls's theories exclude all other artefacts, as well as the moral actions of individuals, which, as we have seen already, are two of the conditions capable of determining the ethical level of any society. This is one of the shortcomings this thesis intends to address availing itself of the *Prosopon Ethos* approach outlined this far.

⁷⁶ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 93.

According to the *Prosopon Ethos*, the notions of what is just and what is good coincide and are both the goal of ethical action. We have defined ethical action as that attitude of openness oriented toward *personal* relationships with others. While "good," according to the definition attributed by Benanti and Maffettone to Habermas and Rawls, concerns the individual person, the need to introduce "right" arises from that person's relationship with the other. In the *Prosopon Ethos*, however, the encounter with otherness, as the foundation of personal life, is already present in the concept of "good," which coincides, therefore, with that of "right." This does not imply, however, that the need to find common ground with others, which arises in many cases, is to be jettisoned. It means that it needs to become a strategic part of an attitude of radical openness toward others. As we have already discussed above, this approach of the *Prosopon Ethos* is actually composed of a subset of attitudes which orient us toward a certain form of ethical existence, that is, a personal mode of existence, to which everyone can freely choose to adhere, paraphrasing the definition of justice attributed by Maffettone and Benanti to Habermas and Rawls. If this ethos is to become concrete, among the attitudes already mentioned, a predisposition towards understanding others and their context and a bent towards mediation, are also necessary. Encountering others, at this point, is not imposed upon us by the necessity of coexistence, but something that provides us with an opportunity for personal fulfilment. It permits us to bridge the gaps left by the two fields of individual morality and institutionalised public ethics intended as artefacts. Ultimately, the adoption of the *Prosopon Ethos* permits the unification of the goals of all ethics. While it does not eliminate the need to establish sub-goals and sub-categories, it does allow for the realisation of a common good that can be truly universal in the intersubjective sense, because it coincides with both the good of individuals and the good of all. To justify this statement even further, we can carry out a brief historical analysis of the relational categories of the impersonal, the individual, and the personal. Throughout human history, a number of social models proposed the prioritisation of the good of individuals over that of the collectivity (*the individualistic social model*), considering the latter, perhaps, as the sum of the good of individuals, while others (*impersonal social model*, like that of Communist Russia) forced people to abandon the pursuit of the individual good in favour of the collective good. In the latter case, and particularly with regard to the Soviet Communist system, this was clearly an impersonal political, economic, and social system. It occurred because its theoretical premises were due precisely to the intention of imposing an idea, that of "equality," upon the reality. This attitude gave rise to a decidedly normative and violent system that repressed personal freedom. Its failure, on the basis of this interpretation, was due, indeed, to the exclusive presence of the impersonal drive, which suppressed the possibility of expressing the desire for *identity*.

In both cases (the individualistic social and the impersonal social models), however, the original structure of human experience is betrayed. This means that what is called for, as we have seen, is a personal mode of relationship. A third case can be found in systems that seek to allow the individual and the impersonal models to coexist, without resolving their contradictions, however. These models are highly resilient because they provide the possibility of not having to abandon the system in order to move from a desire for *relatedness* to one of *union*, though the two remain at loggerheads. An example of this is the capitalist system. Here, history

has witnessed multiple evolutions of the same system, within which individual and impersonal drives have coexisted simultaneously. This facet appears to be the underpinning strength both of capitalism itself and of the free-market principle. In actual fact, the free market is characterised by two opposing polar forces: the impersonal one of the invisible hand of the market and the individual one of the self-interests of individual economic agents.

All told, the goal of the *Prosopon Ethos* is to establish itself as the basic grounds for the transition of human society toward one based on the *personal mode of existence*, where the good of the individual and common good can coincide and be realised in each another. We have seen how in the *Prosopon Ethos* personal relationships, the needs for identity (which underpins the pursuit of individual good) and relatedness (which underpins the pursuit of the collective good) are both fully realised. In short, a personal society is a one in which people adopt the *Prosopon Ethos* as an attitude towards and a way of life where the artefacts that comprise it become increasingly "personal" and therefore ethical.

3.2 Truth as the Outcome of Personal Experience

ABSTRACT

The discussion continues with a reflection on the universality of truth, which cannot be resolved either through depersonalising objectification or by authoritarian imposition. Here, universality is intended as the convergence of the entire person. The truth sought is, in fact, personal, integral, and symbolic: it arises from the original relational experience, in which being is being-with. While Habermas and Rawls assume that being is part of liberal democracy, the Prosopon Ethos, on the contrary, has "being a person" as its sole prerequisite: an unconditional openness to the Other that enables cooperation even without ideological uniformity (as occurs, by analogy, in commercial and diplomatic exchanges). The aim of the pathway undertaken thus far is not to impose abstract truths, but to foster an experience that leads to self-knowledge and the fullness of truth through the adoption of a life posture. Thus understood, the Prosopon Ethos makes good and justice coincide: the encounter with otherness is constitutive of good itself, even though it requires mediation and knowledge of the context. On the normativity level, it positions itself as a "third way": neither top-down impersonalism nor individualistic scepticism, but a relational normativity that emerges from below in intersubjective practices. This leads to the proposal of a truly universal public ethic: accessible, intersubjective, and capable of reconciling individual morality as well as the morality of artefacts in the Onlife World.

Another issue which emerges here is that of the universality of truth, therefore of the universalisability of an ethical-social model. In fact, to achieve universality Habermas and Rawls made a successful attempt at reducing what is good to a subset of what is right, so that everyone within the system of liberal democracies might agree. The notion of truth that emerges in their case, focuses "on which everyone should agree." Conversely, the universality of truths has often been sought on the basis of perfection and logical and formal

rigor or on their mandatory and authoritarian imposition, or, on their claim to scientificity. In many other cases, it has actually been denied altogether. Furthermore, to achieve truth, attempts have been made to render knowledge itself "objective," meaning the removal of human subjectivity both as observer and observed with the result of objectifying and depersonalising the human being and truth itself. The universality we seek here through the *Prosopon Ethos*, is quite akin to that proposed by Rawls and Habermas. The values proposed by those two thinkers were not the product of mere intellectual speculation or subjectivism, but rather the outcome of the engagement of the whole human being, including his/her discursive-rational, emotional, value-based, and communal components. Likewise, by "truth" here we mean that around which all human beings can converge, not merely in the sense of intellectual consensus or custom, but in the sense of the totality of the person which requires the inclusion of all the dimensions of their being and their lives. Therefore, the insights we reach in this thesis will not claim to be objective, though this does not mean they will not be true. In particular, the type of knowledge we intend here is personal, integral, and symbolic, as posited by the various twentieth-century Russian thinkers we cited above. For this very reason and because the philosophical reflection of this thesis seeks to be radically concrete rather than abstract, we have started recognising the original structure of human experience, which we have discovered to be relational. Human experience is not a purely "rational" experience; it is a comprehensive one involving all the dimensions of the human being: affective-psychological, corporeal, historical, relational, spiritual. This fundamental experience is the self-other relationship. Every form of life and all theoretical explanations presuppose and develop, explicitly or implicitly, a certain way of understanding this unique relationship. Being is never a pure, neutral or objective fact: it is always a *being-with*, a relationship that establishes the very identity of the self. Self-awareness is, from the onset, awareness of the *Other*, just as awareness of the *Other* is self-awareness. The single person does not emerge or develop within a vacuum but within a weave of relationships that define and shape him or her.

In this sense, ontology, ethics, and life cannot be considered separate domains: the structure of being implies an ethical position and determines a way of life. In this regard, Nikolai Berdyaev assumed that ontology was not a neutral science of objectified being, but the revelation of the living, spiritual, and free being, stating that "being itself has an ethical meaning."⁷⁷

One limitation of Habermas and Rawls's formulation, however, is that the two thinkers developed their normative models within a liberal-democratic framework assumed as an implicit and undisputed backdrop. This assumption, while consistent with the Western political tradition and acceptable to those who adhere to it, reveals clear limitations when referred to today's multipolar context, where profoundly different political and cultural systems, not always attributable to a liberal matrix, coexist. It risks reducing the scope of intercultural dialogue, as it stems from categories and values typical of a single traditional context. On the contrary, the *Prosopon Ethos* poses the sole prerequisite of being a person: it does not require that the other share any given set of ideas or values, since openness toward the other is unconditional and rooted in personal

⁷⁷ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trad. (edited by) Natalie Duddington, San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009.

relationships. In this sense, this particular *ethos* may be compared to the workings of trade where an exchange of goods and services occurs even between peoples with very different political, religious, or cultural views. This is possible because the system is based on universal and immediate human needs. Just as trade is capable of fostering interaction and cooperation despite the existence of differing views, the *Prosopon Ethos* is founded on a common anthropological element that enables authentic encounters even in the absence of cultural or ideological uniformity. In actual fact, the personal approach favours true multiculturalism, which does not involve either the impersonal erasure of cultural identities or the individual affirmation of one culture over others. Furthermore, trade itself might actually constitute a privileged channel for the spread of the *Prosopon Ethos* model. The same is true of diplomatic exchange, as both trade and diplomacy provide concrete opportunities of encounter, acknowledgement, and the construction of bonds based on reciprocity.

These pathways would make the *Prosopon Ethos* model a truly universal one, accessible to all, regardless of cultural affiliation. The purpose of the journey undertaken here is not to convince the reader or the world of a series of abstract "truths" or to make him/her/them adhere to a particular worldview, but to conduct them toward a profound experience of their own humanity. To this end, we have sought to identify essential insights concerning the human person and to propose forms of conduct that may facilitate entry into the *personal mode of existence*. We feel that the answer to the question of humanity cannot be the result of reasoning or argumentation pursued in a thesis such as this, however precise and timely it may be, but can only be the fruit of life experience. However, what is proposed here is that the convergence of human beings toward self-knowledge and the full expression of the truth of their humanity, is not the natural consequence of living, but the result of having adopted a certain attitude toward life, which we call the *Prosopon Ethos*.

To conclude and return to proposing the *Prosopon Ethos* as a universal public ethics, it is useful to tap into the concept of normativity. By normativity, we mean, as Maffettone points out, the conformity of behaviour to shared criteria. In this regard, Maffettone makes a distinction between a type of normativity "from above" (*top-down*) and one "from below" (*bottom-up*). While imposed *top-down* normativity risks becoming abstract and impersonal, *bottom-up* normativity stems from intersubjective practices and concrete negotiations between subjects. The *Prosopon Ethos* collocates itself precisely within this perspective by proposing a relational form of ethics arising from living encounters between people, grounded in freedom to adhere, a third way collocated between impersonal *top-down* normativity and the absence of normativity typical of individualistic scepticism.

3.3 The Historical Roots of the Crisis of Normativity

ABSTRACT

We continue by retracing the steps of the crisis of normativity to demonstrate the need for the Prosopon Ethos as a metaphysical, bottom-up, and normative paradigm of life, capable of reconnecting public ethics, individual morality, ontology, and life experience. By "Normativity" here is meant the ability to regulate behaviour on the basis of shared

criteria; its obfuscation stems from the separation between what is and what ought to be. Yannaras emphasises the outcome of an abstract normative approach: ethics detaches itself from the "hypostatic identity" of the human being, generating rejection of the norm and a crisis of metaphysics. Following Maffettone's analysis of the history of ideas, we show how the metaphysical-religious legitimization of common criteria yields to a form of pluralism that degenerates into scepticism: without shared standards, ethical discourse is drained. Modernity accentuates this process: from Kant (the autonomy of reason) to Marx's and Freud's unmaskings, to the twentieth-century fracture. The protagonists of this fracture are Wittgenstein, who anchors ethics to forms of life, Foucault, who concerns himself with knowledge/power, and Deleuze, who rejects external norms, disconnected from life. On the historical-social front, complexity, globalisation, and digital technologies produce "social morphogenesis": continuous shifts in codes and normative frameworks. This leads back to the original proposal of a relational and personal ethics—the *Prosopon Ethos*—one that seeks to reconnect normativity and being by permitting shared criteria to emerge from below in intersubjective practices.

In order to grasp the novelty of the *Prosopon Ethos*, as a metaphysical, moral, normative bottom-up life paradigm, and the fact that it may be regarded as a possible response to the limitations that Benanti and Maffettone identified in Habermas's and Rawls's thinking regarding public ethics⁷⁸, it is vital to go into the issue of the crisis of normativity which, according to Benanti and Maffettone, has remained open from the time of the famous German philosopher and central figure of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). For Kant *Normative ethics* means "that branch of moral philosophy aimed at determining, justifying, and applying criteria of right and good to veritable ethical problems"⁷⁹ while *Metaethics*, on the other hand, deals with the definition of these criteria. On this topic, we now propose a personal and critical re-reading of Sebastiano Maffettone's diagnosis of the crisis of normativity, as presented during his General Philosophy course at Rome's Luiss *Guido Carli* University (academic years 2022 and 2025). While drawing upon its core arguments, the interpretation presented here seeks to develop some aspects in an original way, emphasising how the crisis of normativity is no mere loss of shared norms, but may be seen as a symptom of a deeper detachment of ethics from ontology and concrete life. This discussion should help us outline the *Prosopon Ethos* more clearly as a form of ethics capable of bridging the gap between public ethics, individual morality, ontology and concrete life.

The kernel of this analysis contains the notion of normativity, intended, precisely, as the ability to regulate behaviour according to shared criteria. Thinking normatively, Maffettone postulates, means thinking about "how things ought to be," in a logical and ethical sense: a means by which to address self-reflective thought critically and prescriptively. This intellectual action permits us to review what happens in the light of moral and political evaluations, asking the question "how should things be? It involves an essential orientation of thought and action, and expresses the evaluative dimension inherent to human beings. In short, it is an instance of reconciliation between fact and value. With respect to this question, the consideration of the contemporary Greek philosopher and theologian Christos Yannaras (1935–2024) is quite interesting as it highlights how a

⁷⁸ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*.

⁷⁹ Maffettone, *Etica pubblica*, p. 41.

normative approach to ethics can create a clear distinction between "the ethos of man, [that is] his individual behaviour, [and] the existential truth and hypostatic identity of man, that is, what man fundamentally is, prior to any social and objective evaluation."⁸⁰ It is precisely this approach, Yannaras argues, that excludes from the realm of ethics the ontological question concerning "what man truly is, independently of what he ought to be and his response to this obligation". This plausible effect of a normative approach to the meaning of humanity lies at the root of two historical phenomena: contemporary culture's rejection of normativity itself and the crisis of metaphysics. Normativity and metaphysics entered into crisis precisely as a consequence of their separation. At this point, the ethical norm, having been detached from being and life and considered abstract as a result, is perceived as alien and rejected, therefore. An ethic that excludes the ontological question and configures it only as human conformity to norms established on principles of authority or convention, can also become a source of alienation for human beings and a refuge from the "tragic nature of people's mortal biological existence" and can lead humans to wear "a behavioural mask borrowed from ideological or party authorities to save themselves from their very being and the questions this poses them."⁸¹

In times previous to ours, Maffettone explains, the idea that there were common criteria capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, between true and false, was considered self-evident: ethical norms appeared legitimised on metaphysical or religious grounds capable of ensuring intersubjective convergence. Maffettone continues, however, arguing that today, within the milieu of public ethics, it is no longer possible to affirm the existence of truth or justice independent of the discursive processes we use to construct them. Today, it is as if pluralism has outgrown itself, assuming the form of a widespread scepticism that denies the very possibility of shared criteria. However, as the liberal philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) observed, pluralism possesses a positive value in that it fosters the exchange and improvement of ideas, something that contemporary scepticism fails to achieve. This scepticism, according to Maffettone, corresponds to the suspicion that ethical discourse is meaningless given the supposition that it is impossible to find common standards capable of establishing who or what is right or wrong. Without these shared criteria, the discussion risks becoming null and void and being reduced to a sterile repetition of subjective opinions. To understand this crisis fully, Maffettone invites us to interpret it as a long-standing historical-philosophical process. Within this interpretative framework, the original interpretation this thesis seeks to advance is that this crisis emerges as the outcome of a process of progressive abstraction of moral reflection, which has lost its connection with experience, life, and being.

Another important point made by Maffettone is that philosophical modernity undertook a slow process of the deconstruction of the very idea of normativity. Having overcome idealism, dealing with the crisis of the principle of God as a guarantee of knowledge and moral norm, Kant attempted to replace transcendence with the autonomy of the rational subject. And so, humans became their own legislators. However, this very same independence, the foundation of ethics and democratic citizenship, subsequently became vulnerable to new

⁸⁰ Christos Yannaras, *La libertà dell'ethos. Alle radici della crisi morale dell'Occidente*, trad. (edited by) Basilio Petrà Magnano (BI), Qiqajon, 2014, p. 19.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

critical assessments. The celebrated philosopher and economist, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and the founder of the school of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), for example, unmasked the universalistic claims of moral reason, showing that behind them lay relations of productivity, material interests, or unconscious desires. Subsequently, between the two world wars of the twentieth century, a period of radical mistrust emerged, marked by the collapse of certainties and the inability to establish common principles. This sentiment characterised the whole of the twentieth century, the century during which this crisis was consolidated. The twentieth was the century of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), Austro-English language philosopher, one of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers, who, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, advanced the idea that meaning depends on use and is comprehensible only within the "forms of life" within which it occurs. Every language has its own meta-language, but there is no universal meta-language capable of translating one into another perfectly: understanding is possible only if one can relive the experience of the *Other*. Meaning, as Maffettone argued, is not "suspended above" the practices we experience but is internal to them. Wittgenstein's perspective shows clearly how and why a meaning, a norm, an ethic that, disconnected from life and being, seeks to regulate them from the outside, can no longer function. Foucault fortified this perspective, albeit in a different and original way. He assumed this intuition in an original way, arguing that no privileged external point of view from which to observe and order reality exists, like that found in Platonic dualism. Knowledge is not a neutral copy of reality, but the result of discursive practices interwoven with power. From this, according to Maffettone, it is possible to deduce that we can only "surf" the waves of the present, accepting that meaning is immanent to practices and not suspended in some kind of abstract order. Finally, Gilles Deleuze (1925 -1995), post-structuralist philosopher central to French twentieth-century thought, takes an analogous stand by opposing any form whatsoever of transcendent structure or unitary totalisation. Reality, for him, is multiplicity, difference, involving processes of becoming that cannot be frozen into fixed forms. Here too, the crisis of normativity manifests itself as a rejection of abstract and universal criteria: the norm appears as a violent imposition brought to bear on the irreducible plurality of reality. Alongside this philosophical reading of the crisis of normativity, which we have traced following Maffettone, it is possible to consider a more historical and social dimension. The growing complexity of globalised societies, cultural interdependence, and the rapid development of digital technologies are producing what some authors have called "social morphogenesis":⁸² a continuous shift in normative frameworks and codes of behaviour.

⁸² Margaret S. Archer, ed., *Morphogenesis and the Crisis of Normativity*, Cham: Springer, 2016.

3.4 A Relational Interpretation of the Crisis of Normativity

ABSTRACT

We then proceed with an original interpretation of the crisis of normativity from a relational perspective: no mere lack of common rules, but a tension between the impersonal and individual modes, with a historical trajectory that slides back and forth between the one and the other. Postmodernism (Lyotard) embodies the individual conclusion: disbelief in metanarratives, radical scepticism, and the incommunicability of criteria of truth/justice. Upstream, Cartesian dualism (*res cogitans/res extensa*) legitimises abstract schemes unconnected to experience (see Damasio), fuels bureaucratic impersonality (Weber), and provokes individualistic reactions (Taylor). The result is polarisation: anonymous standardisation, on the one hand, self-referential autonomy, on the other. For Maffettone, "discourse" is the only alternative to violence. The *Prosopon Ethos* reinterprets discourse as encounter: it realigns thought and being by re-establishing normativity, mutual understanding and mediation in personal relationships. According to MacIntyre, the crisis of normativity may also be interpreted as a loss of "telos". The approach outlined in the present thesis proposes a "telos" that is not imposed but something to be discovered with others, as joint growth of relatedness and identity. Thus, the *Prosopon Ethos* provides a way out from polarisation by restoring a bottom-up type of normativity that stems from practices of encounter typical of the personal mode of existence.

Having provided a brief account of Maffettone's affirmations and having mentioned social morphogenesis, we shall now try to show that the crisis of normativity does not consist only in a lack of common rules, but that, following a relation prospective, it also reflects the deep tension existing between impersonal and individual modes of relationship. It is, therefore, possible to read the crisis of normativity as a pathway between the impersonal and the individual. The postmodern era too stands on this pathway that was introduced by Lyotard⁸³'s critique of the all-encompassing "great narratives". Postmodernism rejects the idea that a general sense can be found, while opposing the centrality of the human, reason and truth as universal concepts. Here we find a radical criticism of the possibility of fully converting one experience into another, of the claim that a meta-language valid for all languages is possible. What we find here is an extreme drift of the individual relational mode, which Maffettone calls "radical scepticism", that is, the alleged impossibility and pointlessness of sharing common criteria of true and false or right and wrong. Without shared criteria - Maffettone argues - public discourse becomes void and turns into a simple exchange of immeasurable opinions, without any possibility of verification or refutation. This incommunicability is precisely the triumph of the *individual mode of relation*.

The process leading from the impersonal to the individual has its root further upstream than the eras we have analysed so far. We find it, in particular, in Cartesian dualism, which separated the *res cogitans* from the *res extensa*, the idea from the thing in itself. This fracture has helped legitimise violence of ideas over concrete

⁸³ Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), one of France's principal theoreticians of postmodernism, described this condition as "incredulity towards meta-narrations" (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trad. (edited by) Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).)

reality and the alleged right to impose abstract normative schemes, disconnected from experience and being⁸⁴; it has led to the impersonal rigidity of bureaucratic systems⁸⁵ and detonated individual rebellion⁸⁶. The impersonal mode is characterised by standardisation, anonymity, by the reduction of the *Other* and oneself to mere functions, numbers, bureaucratic roles or objects of technical calculation or ethical-regulatory imposition. It is the prime product of dualism, which permits the idea to forcefully constrain the reality, life and the person within its abstract categories, and depersonalise them. It creates efficient apparatuses but empties relationships, thus producing alienation and indifference⁸⁷. The individual mode, on the other hand, takes form as a reaction to this depersonalisation: it exalts the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the individual, but risks degenerating into isolation, exasperated competition, and the rejection of all limits and inter-subjectivity. The crisis of normativity is, therefore, a polarisation of these two extremes: impersonal abstraction and individualistic fragmentation. In a similar fracture between the idea and the thing itself, it is clear that ethical norms are perceived as alien to both being and concrete life, and therefore abandoned. The only way out is an ethos that goes beyond the formulation of norms, overcoming the profound separation between norms, ethics, and life. The *Prosopon Ethos* is the route.

Addressing this scenario, Maffettone hypothesises the crucial nature of discourse as the only alternative to violence, the only tool capable of finding points of convergence. Discourse poses demands for two reasons, however. The first coincides with the third limitation that Maffettone and Benanti detect in the thinking of Habermas and Rawls.⁸⁸ This limitation is grounded in the need that universal public ethics transcend the confines of liberal democracies. The concept of discourse as we intend here it belongs undoubtedly to Western culture. In this multipolar world of ours, however, it is now clear that it is impossible to reason in a hegemonic Western-style manner; we need to relate to other interlocutors as equals. Even when interpreting international relations, as we have already shown, the impersonal–individual relational paradigm helps us understand situations clearly. The second reason why discourse poses demands is that it risks coinciding with that very same empty, abstract, and life-detached discourse which, as we have seen, is no longer capable of grasping the complexity of the reality. With this in mind *Prosopon Ethos* proposed here seeks to recover Habermas and Rawls's notion of discourse as a tool for constructing inter-subjectivity, but it extends discourse to include an encounter, a comprehensive relational experience that forsakes the dualism existing between thought and being, ideas and things. This enlarged kind of discourse is thus led back to the experience of personal relationships and should avoid the risk of declining into the impersonal, as is the case with life-detached discourse, or into the individual, with its probability of incommunicability. The *Prosopon Ethos* presupposes not an ethics of discourse but an ethics of encounter and personal reaction. This ethics, which tends towards a

⁸⁴ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

⁸⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trad. (edited by) Ephraim Fischhoff et al. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

⁸⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

⁸⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trad. (edited by) Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

⁸⁸ Benanti and Maffettone, *Noi e la macchina*, p. 93.

personal mode of existence, diverges from the impersonal and individual modes we have seen already. This takes concrete shape when an attitude of understanding of oneself and of others is adopted, in particular, the respective expectations and needs of the self and the *Other* alike, the reference context and mediation regarding the object of discussion.

To understand the need for this original perspective better, we can turn to the studies of Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-2025), the renowned contemporary Scottish philosopher, and his interpretation of the crisis of normativity. He highlights the shortcomings of the ethical paradigm of modernity, namely, ethics intended as behaviour oriented toward good. The proposal of an alternative paradigm, which is being advanced in the present thesis, arises precisely from the perception of the inadequacy of the Enlightenment project of moral justification, which MacIntyre himself deems a failure⁸⁹ and the crisis of which is evident today. To explain the reasons for this, MacIntyre begins by presenting the essential structure of the mediaeval European moral model, whose form does not differ greatly from that of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is characterised by three elements: human beings as they are, human beings as they can become if they realise their essence (the telos, the true goal of humans), and, finally, precepts (i.e., suggested virtues and forbidden vices) that permit one to move from the first state (potentiality) to the second (action). MacIntyre retains that the concept of telos was lost with the Enlightenment, and that this led philosophers to address the apparent contradiction between the two remaining elements of the old mediaeval moral model: the human being as he/she is and moral precepts. This contradiction appeared irreconcilable and led to the crisis of normativity: moral precepts lost their meaning, and, so, normativity declined into scepticism and relativism.

If we go beyond MacIntyre's analysis, it is possible to appreciate the value of abandoning the telos. The problem with the telos is that it risks being *top-down* and, therefore, merely an ideological kind of projection. It is also challenging to agree regarding the certainty of the existence of a human telos. However, what we can all agree on is that, as we have already hypothesised, the gradual flourishing of the human being is played out by permitting the desires of *relatedness* and *identity* to express themselves to the full. In this sense, this thesis has thus far proposed a conception of ethics grounded in a new telos, which is, however, not something already determined but something that people can discover jointly as human beings. So, life's journey becomes an opportunity to question one's initial assumptions and convictions through encounters with others who hold different ones. This encounter provides everyone involved with the opportunity to develop and grow. In this sense, human history can be experienced as a progressive journey toward an ever-greater expression of the truth of the person as *Prosopon*. The difference between the notions of *Prosopon* and the telos that have characterised ethics in the past, is that the *Prosopon* is not predetermined but needs to be discovered, expressed. This discovery does not stem from classically understood moral precepts, but from the *Prosopon Ethos*, that is, an attitude of radical openness toward others which permits each one's personal mode of existence to express itself. Aristotle also acknowledged this: a series of good habits exists that allow human beings to

⁸⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007; hardcover repr., 2022.

express a certain way of life. The purpose of this thesis is to go back to the very heart of ethics, that is, to the recovery of a telos that is discovery, not imposition. It is, therefore, a journey into our humanity.

3.5 Transcendence and Normativity

ABSTRACT

Finally, we address the second limitation of the approach of Habermas and Rawls, pointed out by Benanti and Maffettone: elimination of the transcendent, intended as any form whatsoever of moral authority superior to science and conscience. From a relational perspective, the annulment of the transcendent often stems from an impersonal relationship with the Absolute (norms and ideas without encounter), followed by an individualistic emancipatory reaction. As Feuerbach observes, human projections, once autonomised, become a source of alienation; so, from the impersonal we slide into the individual, to the point of incommunicability. From the Enlightenment, centred on the autonomy of the subject, we arrive at postmodernism, which questions humanity, reason, and shared truth, culminating in a critique of the "subject" (male, white, European) and in forms of reductionist scientism while the post-human age (AI in cognitive processes, genetic intervention, human-machine hybridisations) accentuates the removal of the transcendent. Alternatively, the Proponon Ethos proposes ethics as a personal way of life: adherence to the ontological truth of the person without any heteronomous imposition. Its radical openness makes the encounter with the Absolute possible and, at the same time, distances it from the risk of mere projection: not an impersonal idea, but a personal relationship. On this basis, a universal public ethics can reintegrate transcendence without any cultural hegemony, because it is grounded in personal and communitarian encounter.

At this point, it is well worth our while to refer to the second limit that Benanti and Maffettone in *Noi e la macchina* attribute to the work of Habermas and Rawls: denial of the transcendent. By "transcendent," Benanti and Maffettone intend "not only religion but all moral authority superior to science and conscience." The two authors sustain that an analysis of public ethics cannot ignore the transcendent, because "public ethics has religion and the law at its root," and because the transcendent has maintained a significant place in the East. Maffettone and Benanti argue that the discourse on normativity is profoundly intertwined with transcendence. In this regard, even the process that led to the denial of the transcendent in the West may be read by applying the relational interpretation we recurred to above when dealing with the crisis of normativity. In actual fact, one possible interpretation is that the abandonment of a certain idea of God has contributed to human emancipation, human individualisation. This individualist motion was, however, a response to an impersonal one. It is no coincidence that we have used the term "idea" to indicate the human being's relationship with God. If humanity's relationship with the Absolute is impersonal, based, therefore, on norms or ideas alone, it is clear that this can only asphyxiate human freedom and cause people to flee from the relationship in an effort to find their own independence. In reality, in this situation it is a human projection from which humans flee.

This point was emphasised, for example, by the German philosopher, historian and exponent of the Hegelian left, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), who was profoundly critical of religion. According to him religious concepts were human projections, which, by becoming autonomous and impersonal entities, ended up by alienating and limiting the freedom of the human being.⁹⁰ Therefore, as long as the relationship with otherness is experienced impersonally, it will lead to nothing but the triumph of the individual and subsequent incommunicability, violence, and self-affirmation. It is precisely this risk that the proposal of the *Prosopon Ethos*, configured as an ethical attitude and way of life, as adherence to the ontological truth of personhood, seeks to address. The marginalisation of the idea of God was tantamount to the triumph of the autonomy of humanity during the Enlightenment. At the beginning of this process, it seemed possible to preserve, even increase acknowledgement of the value of humanity, but, later, this went on to become postmodernism, which challenged the centrality of humanity, of reason, and of truth as a shared heritage. It then criticised that very subject who, from Descartes and Kant onward, had replaced God as the guarantor of meaning: a subject historically defined as male, white, and European. Furthermore, a certain kind of scientism has denied a number of assumptions, such as human freedom, upon which our social life has been founded to this day. After postmodernism, we have arrived at post-humanity, characterised by the enhancement of humanity implemented by science and technology: the introduction of artificial intelligence into cognitive and life processes, the modification of our genetic patrimony, and the hybridisation of humans and machines. The transcendent dimension, initially reduced solely to the human being, who perceived her/himself as a transcendent being, ruler of the universe, vanished completely with the abandonment of the centrality of humans themselves, after the centrality of the idea of God had been lost.

In conclusion, we wish to point out that the *Prosopon Ethos* approach embraces the transcendent in its reflections. Indeed, one outcome of a posture of radical openness may be an encounter with the Absolute. Furthermore, this attitude also acts as a guarantee against the risk that our encounter with God may be simply the fruit of human projection.

⁹⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trad. (edited by) Marian Evans, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; first English ed. 1854.

Conclusion

ABSTRACT

Up to here, we have seen how the Onlife condition is a weave of artefacts—technology, institutions, norms, symbols—which, as human products, are related to humanity and its relational modes. The adoption of the Prosopton Ethos as an intercultural and intersubjective paradigm permits us to reconcile individual morality, public and applied ethics, metaphysics, and life experiences centred upon personal relationships. While aiming for a society based on a personal mode of existence, we acknowledge the logical function of the impersonal and individual moments as preliminary phases. The adoption of the Prosopton Ethos endows people with guidance and directs artefacts so that they become "personal," devices capable of revealing faces and fostering encounter and recognition. Since artefacts reflect experiences, the impersonal-individual dichotomy tends to reproduce itself: in the Onlife World, isolation coexists with a virtual unity mediated by algorithmic powers. As a habitus, the Prosopton Ethos rejects a return to impersonal and individual isolation by promoting a reconfiguration of infrastructures and practices based on relational responsibility, mutual recognition, and online/offline balance. To implement the Prosopton Ethos paradigm we propose that organisations recur to a "People Mediator"—external to governance—capable of optimising relationships between internal and external stakeholders and training them in the ethos of the relationship foreseen by the mode and transforming conflict into outcomes that outshine compromise. A first example is provided: the paradigm was applied by the Italian innovative start up Live Connection srl in a successful case study at the Dental Bios srl dental clinic in Rome, where the introduction of a People Mediator like the one hypothesised here, was piloted over a period of six months. This has demonstrated how the adoption of the paradigm can improve relationships, well-being and KPIs thanks to active listening, training in "thinking well of others," and feedback loops. Further studies are required to consolidate the approach, evaluate transferability and scale the model.

We have seen how *Onlife* society is characterised by artefacts, which, in the broadest sense, encompass the whole of culture and its by-products. Since artefacts are human products, it followed that the crucial question concerned human scrutiny and how everything else stemmed from these. Having also analysed the possible relational modes, which we have acknowledged as the original structure of human experience, we have advocated that a certain ethical attitude, defined as the *Prosopton Ethos*, permit humanity to open itself up to a fully personal life, a way of existence, which is the only one that permits us to truly encounter ourselves and others. The ethical attitude proposed here is a true intercultural and intersubjective ethical paradigm founded on recognition of the relational structure of human experience and the centrality of the person. This paradigm aims to provide a key to an understanding, within a coherent and organic framework, of the different dimensions of human existence: the individual morality, public ethics, applied ethics, metaphysical reflection, and lived experience. This means that the *Prosopton Ethos* is an ethical attitude, a lifestyle, and a virtuous approach that, overcoming the opposition existing between the impersonal and the individual, restores centrality to the personal relationship—concrete, embodied, and reciprocal—as a focal aspect of human experience. It is important to emphasise once more that, although an ethics and a society based on a personal mode of existence are desirable, the impersonal and individual aspects, constitute, according to Soloviev, two

moments that logically precede the personal and are, therefore, necessary.

The adoption of the *Prosopon Ethos*, applied to the context of the *Onlife* society, aims to foster transition to a society based on a *personal mode of existence*, that is, a society where human relationships are oriented towards the personal mode and where all *Onlife* artefacts too become "personal," that is, objects that mask the faces behind them, because they are part of an authentic relationship and therefore bent on enhancing the encounter and recognition of the other. The adoption of this ethos is capable of producing concrete transformations within the *Onlife World*. We have demonstrated that, since all *Onlife artefacts*—intended here in their broadest sense as encompassing technologies, platforms, algorithms, institutions, cultural norms, applied ethics and organisational structures—are human products, they inevitably reflect the way human beings live their humanity. If individuals remain trapped in the impersonal-individual dichotomy, even *Onlife* artefacts will reproduce that same paradigm. From the analysis of the *Onlife Society* we carried out in chapter two, it would appear that the Western individual, in order to truly find him/herself by individualising or customising her/himself, has fallen into the trough of the impersonal. This emphasises how the impersonal and the individual are like two sides of the same coin so, that frequently, one emerges in response to the other. If people try to repress one of the two desires for *relatedness and identity*, deluding themselves, it is possible to achieve the other, sooner or later the one that they tried to eliminate will resurface and the other will escape their grasp. In fact, when I customise myself but remain isolated, I ultimately lose my very individuality and fall back into the impersonal abyss from which I was trying to evade. This is clearly what happens in the *Onlife World* we examined above. It is rather clear that in this context, on the one hand, individuals are more isolated, though, at the same time, they seek a virtual unity mediated by impersonal, algorithmic power systems that influence users, often without their knowledge⁹¹.

In this perspective, the *Prosopon Ethos* presents itself as an ethical mode of life that seeks to renounce both a return of any kind to the impersonal dimension and a persistence of individual isolation, while promoting a form of openness to others capable of building up a union founded on free affiliation. A shift toward a *personal mode of existence* opens up the possibility of reconfiguring all *Onlife artefacts*, including offline and online social infrastructures and organisational pathways in light of relational responsibility, mutual recognition, and ethical openness. The *Prosopon Ethos* also provides a framework for assigning the right place to digital technologies in our lives and societies. It fosters a renewed balance between the online and offline dimensions of experience—a form of equilibrium essential to the shaping of a truly human *Onlife* condition. Digital platforms, AI systems, and data-driven cultures can be reshaped using this paradigm.

One possible, specific implementation of this ethical paradigm might be fostered by the introduction of a new professional role, designed to support the practical application of this *Prosopon Ethos* within both public and private organisations. This role would take the form of an external consultant, appointed by the organisation's governance and membership to support organisations in developing ethical cultures rooted in *personal mode*

⁹¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, trad. (edited by) Paolo Bassotti Roma: Luiss University Press, 2019.

of existence. This figure would play a role complementary to that of the traditional HR Manager and act as a mediator of the interests of all the stakeholders, both internal and external. His/her mediatory activity would be conducted according to a paradigm alternative to the two classical approaches to mediation: individual mediation, which focuses on the interests of the individual party, and ontic mediation, which focuses not on the parties but on the best solutions to the problems that arise. The figure presented here, however, would be required to conduct personal mediation based on the *Prosopon Ethos*. According to this approach, conflicting interests between stakeholders would not be seen as a negative factor but as an opportunity to be exploited. When experienced personally, it becomes positive, an opportunity not to negotiate a simple compromise but to achieve an outcome superior to that existing prior to the dispute. This approach would favour a dynamic evolution of the strategic objectives of all the stakeholders and the entire organisation. This mediator would assume the task of optimising human relationships - the true wealth to be preserved - and the role of trainer capable of ensuring that the relationships thus fostered would conform increasingly to the personal mode of existence. The training activity envisaged should focus on all the aspects of the *Prosopon Ethos* presented here.

In conclusion, it is important to point out that the *Prosopon Ethos* is not the arbitrary brainchild of the author of the present thesis, but the outcome of a pathway of study and life experiences. It stems not only from the author's personal growth, but also from the direct and indirect contributions of those who share a personal connection with him. It is within a choral milieu of faces that proposals take shape and aim to be open and accessible to all. This paradigm was used by the Italian innovative start up *Live Connection srl* in a successful case study at the *Dental Bios srl* dental clinic in Rome, where the introduction of a *People Mediator*⁹² like the one hypothesised here, was piloted over a period of six months. Following the *Prosopon Ethos*, starting from a rather challenging initial context, a series of activities were planned, including active listening sessions with all the stakeholders, short training sessions aimed at getting those involved to “think well of others” and fostering empathy, and final feedback sessions aimed at facilitating the establishment of quality relationships. This led to a marked improvement in the state of the relationships within the clinic and, consequently, in the quality of the life of all stakeholders, as well as an improvement in the various economic and financial indicators involved. Further studies will certainly be required to delve more deeply and thoroughly into ways in which the *Prosopon Ethos* may be cultivated within different social contexts. It will be mandatory to observe the results thus obtained and promote further investigation.

⁹² Live Connection Srl, “People Mediator,” *Peopleweb*, accessed 28 August 2025, <https://peopleweb.my.canva.site/people-mediator>

Bibliography

Official Documents

- European Union. *Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act)*. *Official Journal of the European Union*, OJ L, 12 July 2024. ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2020*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.
- Pontifical Academy for Life. *Rome Call for AI Ethics*. Rome, 28 February 2020. <https://www.romecall.org/the-call>.
- Pontifical Academy for Life. *AI Ethics for Peace – Hiroshima Appeal*. Hiroshima, 9–10 July 2024. <https://www.romecall.org/ai-ethics-for-peace-hiroshima-july-10th-2024/>.
- Pontifical Academy for Life. *Roboethics: Humans, Machines and Health*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004; English ed., reprint 2005

Datasets and websites

- Live Connection Srl. “People Mediator.” *Peopleweb*. Accessed 28 August 2025. <https://peopleweb.my.canva.site/people-mediator>
- World Inequality Database (WID). “Data.” Accessed August 23, 2025. <https://wid.world/data/>.

Books and edited volumes

- Archer, Margaret S., ed. *Morphogenesis and the Crisis of Normativity*. Cham: Springer, 2016.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, and David Lyon. *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.
- Benanti, Paolo. *Homo Faber. La condizione tecno-umana*. Bologna: EDB, 2018.
- Benanti, Paolo. *Le macchine sapienti. Intelligenze artificiali e decisioni umane*. Milano: Marietti 1820, 2018.
- Benanti, Paolo. *Digital Age. Teoria del cambio d'epoca. Persona, famiglia e società*. Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Edizioni San Paolo, 2020.
- Benanti, Paolo. *La grande invenzione. Il linguaggio come tecnologia, dalle pitture rupestri al GPT-3*. Cinisello Balsamo (MI): Edizioni San Paolo, 2021.

- Benanti, Paolo, and Sebastiano Maffettone. *Noi e la macchina. Un'etica per l'era digitale*. Roma: Luiss University Press, 2024.
- Berdyaev, Nikolai. *The Destiny of Man*. Translated by Natalie Duddington. San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009. Originally published 1931 (Eng. trans. first ed. 1937).
- Berdyaev, Nikolai. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. Translated by Donald A. Lowrie. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.
- Bodei, Remo. *Dominio e sottomissione. Schiavi, animali, macchine, intelligenza artificiale*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2019.
- Borgmann, Albert. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leigh Star. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Edwards, Paul N. *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.
- Feenberg, Andrew. *Critical Theory of Technology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by Marian Evans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Originally published London: John Chapman, 1854.
- Florensky, Pavel. *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*. Translated by Boris Jakim. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Floridi, Luciano. *Il verde e il blu. Idee ingenuie per migliorare la politica*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2020.
- Floridi, Luciano. *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Floridi, Luciano, ed. *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. Cham: Springer, 2015.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Greenfield, Adam. *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 2017.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990 (repr. 2001).
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

- Heidegger, Martin. *Pathmarks*. Edited by William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998
- Honneth, Axel. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Ihde, Don. *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Jasanoff, Sheila. *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policymakers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007; hardcover repr., 2022.
- Maffettone, Sebastiano. *Etica pubblica. La moralità delle istituzioni nel terzo millennio*. Milano: il Saggiatore, 2001.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Mounier, Emmanuel. *Personalism*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952.
- Mumford, Lewis. *Technics and Civilization*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin Classics, 2021. (*Originally published 1949.*)
- Paglia, Vincenzo. *L'algoritmo della vita. Etica e intelligenza artificiale*. Milano: Piemme, 2024.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Sé come un altro*. Milano: Jaca Book, 2020 (ristampa).
- Ricœur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (repr. 2020).
- Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.
- Searle, John R. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1995.
- Solovyov, Vladimir. *Critique of Abstract Principles*. Translated by Boris Jakim. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008. Originally published 1880–1881.
- Solovyov, Vladimir. *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; London: T&T Clark, 2005.
- Solovyov, Vladimir. *The Meaning of Love*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1985.

- Stefano Quintarelli, *Capitalismo immateriale. Le tecnologie digitali e il nuovo conflitto sociale* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2019).
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff et al. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Wittfogel, Karl A. *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Yannaras, Christos. *The Freedom of Morality*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.
- Yannaras, Christos. *La libertà dell'ethos. Alle radici della crisi morale dell'Occidente*. Traduzione di Basilio Petrà. Magnano (BI): Qiqajon, 2014
- Yannaras, Christos. *Person and Eros*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007.
- Zizioulas, John D. *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. London: T&T Clark, 2006.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*. Roma: Luiss University Press, 2019.

Journal articles & book chapters

- Friedman, Batya, Peter H. Kahn Jr., and Alan Borning. "Value Sensitive Design and Information Systems." In *Human-Computer Interaction in Management Information Systems: Foundations*, edited by Dennis F. Galletta and Ping Zhang, 348–372. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.
- Orlikowski, Wanda J. "Sociomaterial Practices: Exploring Technology at Work." *Organization Studies* 28, no. 9 (2007): 1435–1448.
- Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121–136.

Sacred Scriptures

- *The Holy Bible. English Standard Version—Catholic Edition (ESV-CE), Anglicized text authorised for the Lectionary of England, Wales and Scotland (from Advent 2024)*. London: SPCK/CTS.

Further reading

- Basil of Caesarea. *On the Holy Spirit*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980.
- Berdyaev, Nikolai. *Slavery and Freedom*. 2nd enl. ed. Florence, KY: Sophia Perennis, 2023.
- Berdyaev, Nikolai. *The Russian Idea*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church. Latest approved English edition. London: Catholic Truth Society (CTS), current printing includes the 2018 revision of no. 2267.
- Delmastro, Marco, and Antonio Nicita. *Big Data. Come stanno cambiando il nostro mondo*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2019.
- Florensky, Pavel. *Iconostasis*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.
- Freeman, R. Edward. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Originally published 1984.
- Garasic, Mirko Daniel. *Leviatano 4.0. Politica delle nuove tecnologie*. Roma: Luiss University Press, 2022.
- Gregory of Nazianzus. *Festal Orations*. Popular Patristics Series 36. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008.
- Gregory of Nazianzus. *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*. Popular Patristics Series 23. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.
- Gregory of Nyssa. "To Ablabius: On Not Three Gods." In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 5: Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Reprint ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022.
- Jensen, Michael C. "Value Maximization, Stakeholder Theory, and the Corporate Objective Function." *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance* 14, no. 3 (2001): 8–21.
- Solovyov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Divine Humanity*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1995.
- Solovyov, Vladimir. *War, Progress, and the End of History: Three Conversations Including a Short Story of the Antichrist*. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1990.
- Špidlík, Tomáš, and Marko I. Rupnik. *Teologia pastorale. A partire dalla bellezza*. 2a ed. Roma: Lipa, 2005. (Specifically, ch. 1 "La lettura spirituale della realtà"; ch. 2 "L'uomo, persona agapica".)
- Špidlík, Tomáš, and Marko I. Rupnik. *Una conoscenza integrale. La via del simbolo*. Roma: Lipa, 2010.
- Yannaras, Christos. *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*. Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013.
- Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985 (repr. 1997).