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The Ontology of Human Freedom in the Algorithmic Age: Reconstructing Philosophical Anthropology from Homo Digitalis to Imago Dei

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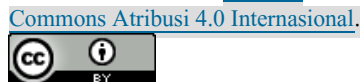
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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of artificial intelligence, digital algorithms, and social media has fundamentally transformed the way human beings think, make decisions, and construct their identities. Amid the abundance of choices and unlimited access to information, a new paradox emerges: people experience greater freedom while simultaneously having their consciousness subtly shaped by algorithmic systems, the attention economy, and digital connectivity. This study aims to examine the transformation of human freedom in the digital age from the perspectives of philosophy and Catholic theological anthropology. Employing a qualitative library research design, the study analyzes data through content analysis integrated with a critical hermeneutical approach involving data reduction, conceptual synthesis, philosophical-theological interpretation, and reflective conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the central crisis of the digital era is fundamentally anthropological rather than technological. Human freedom is not eliminated directly but reconstructed into an illusion of freedom through algorithmic personalization, digital convenience, and predictive technological systems, gradually weakening reflective autonomy, authentic relationships, and moral responsibility. The study further argues that the transition toward Homo Digitalis must be counterbalanced by the development of Homo sapiens sapiens, a vision of humanity characterized not merely by knowledge but by moral wisdom capable of directing technology toward the common good. Grounded in the Christian understanding of the human person as imago Dei, technology should remain an instrument serving human dignity rather than redefining human existence itself. This study contributes a conceptual synthesis linking contemporary philosophy, Christian anthropology, and digital ethics, thereby offering a renewed theological perspective on human freedom in the age of artificial intelligence

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which human beings understand themselves, relate to others, and exercise their capacity for decision-making. Within the contemporary digital environment, individuals appear to enjoy unprecedented access to information, social interaction, and opportunities for self-expression. Yet beneath this abundance of choices and

connectivity lies an increasingly pressing philosophical question: has human freedom genuinely expanded, or has it been subtly transformed into a new form of dependence that often escapes conscious awareness? This question is particularly significant because, within the philosophical tradition, freedom has never been understood merely as the ability to select among multiple alternatives. Rather, freedom presupposes the autonomy of the human subject to deliberate,

judge, and determine actions through reflective self-consciousness within the horizon of moral responsibility. Genuine freedom, therefore, requires not only the capacity to choose but also the ability to understand why one chooses. Consequently, the proliferation of options in the digital age cannot simply be equated with a corresponding expansion of human freedom.

The digital condition instead reveals an emerging mode of subject formation in which algorithmic systems, recommendation engines, and the architecture of the attention economy increasingly shape individual preferences, direct attention, and construct perceptions of significance. These mechanisms rarely operate through explicit coercion; rather, they function subtly, adaptively, and often imperceptibly, gradually influencing human consciousness and patterns of decision-making. Under such conditions, the distinction between autonomous choice and technologically mediated choice becomes increasingly blurred. In this regard, the Catholic Church has expressed profound concern regarding what *Laudato Si'* describes as the technocratic paradigm, which tends to reduce reality to categories of efficiency, control, and instrumental rationality (LS, no. 106). Within this paradigm, technology ceases to function merely as a neutral instrument and instead becomes a formative framework through which human beings perceive both the world and themselves. Similar concerns are articulated in the Church's contemporary reflections on artificial intelligence, which insist that technological innovation must remain subordinate to the inherent dignity of the human person and should never reduce humanity to the functional logic of computational systems.

Existing scholarship has examined digital technology from diverse perspectives, including ethics, sociology, psychology, education, and pastoral theology. These studies have significantly enriched discussions concerning data privacy, mental health, digital communication, and the opportunities and challenges of evangelization within online environments. Contemporary philosophical reflections likewise contribute

important insights. Franz Magnis-Suseno argues that authentic freedom cannot be separated from truth and moral responsibility, while F. Budi Hardiman demonstrates that digital technologies reshape the very structures of human consciousness in contemporary society. Similarly, Armada Riyanto emphasizes relationality as the constitutive foundation of human existence. Nevertheless, despite these valuable contributions, a systematic integration of philosophical conceptions of freedom, digitally mediated subjectivity, and theological anthropology remains insufficiently developed. Current scholarship continues to address these dimensions largely in isolation, leaving unresolved the broader anthropological implications of digital transformation.

This study argues that the most profound challenge confronting human freedom in the digital age no longer arises primarily from external constraints or political coercion, but from the internal reconfiguration of human desire, attention, and self-understanding through algorithmic mediation. What is ultimately at stake is not merely the capacity to choose among competing alternatives but the very structure of consciousness that makes authentic choice possible. Against this background, the present article addresses the following research question: In what sense can human freedom still be considered authentic when digital structures increasingly participate in shaping human preferences, intentionality, and self-consciousness? To answer this question, the study re-examines the concept of human freedom through the complementary perspectives of philosophical anthropology and Catholic social theology. Furthermore, it seeks to uncover the forms of illusory freedom generated within contemporary digital society and to propose a renewed anthropological framework in which the human person, understood as *Imago Dei*, remains the normative foundation for evaluating technological development rather than its passive product.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative library research design, employing content analysis integrated with a

critical hermeneutical approach to examine the philosophical and theological dimensions of human freedom in the context of digital transformation. The integration of these analytical approaches enables a systematic exploration of conceptual relationships while facilitating a critical interpretation of the anthropological and ethical implications of contemporary digital technologies.

The analytical process was conducted through four sequential stages. First, data reduction involved identifying, selecting, and categorizing relevant scholarly sources according to the principal themes of the study, namely human freedom, philosophical anthropology, artificial intelligence, digital society, and Catholic theological reflection. Second, the collected data were organized through conceptual synthesis, establishing a dialogical engagement between contemporary philosophical thought, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, and interdisciplinary scholarship on digital ethics and technological development. Third, critical hermeneutical interpretation was employed to uncover the interconnected meanings embedded within these diverse intellectual traditions, thereby constructing a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of human freedom in the algorithmic age. Finally, conclusions were formulated through critical-reflective reasoning, developing a coherent philosophical-theological argument concerning the implications of artificial intelligence for human dignity understood through the Christian doctrine of *Imago Dei*. Rather than merely describing digital phenomena, this analytical framework seeks to generate a conceptual synthesis that offers a renewed philosophical and theological perspective on the meaning of human freedom within contemporary digital society.

The primary sources of this research consist of key documents of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, including *Laudato Si'*, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Dilexit Nos*, and *Antiqua et Nova*, which provide the theological framework for evaluating the ethical and anthropological implications of emerging technologies. These ecclesial texts are examined in dialogue with the philosophical works of Franz Magnis-Suseno, F. Budi Hardiman, and Armada Riyanto, as well as the historical and anthropological analyses of Yuval Noah Harari presented in *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. These sources are engaged dialogically to construct a critical reflection on the

relationship between humanity, freedom, and digital technology. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is not to formulate technical solutions to technological challenges but to offer a philosophical-theological interpretation of the transformation of human freedom under the conditions of contemporary digital society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Paradox of Modern Human Freedom: The Expansion of Choice and the Illusion of Autonomy

The findings of this study indicate that human freedom within contemporary digital society does not develop linearly as an expansion of human autonomy; rather, it undergoes a profound structural transformation characterized by paradox. On the one hand, digital technologies including the Internet, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence have significantly expanded the range of human possibilities. Individuals now enjoy unprecedented access to information, establish social relationships beyond geographical boundaries, and exercise self-expression through an increasingly diverse array of digital platforms.

Nevertheless, this expansion of available options should not be equated with a corresponding enhancement of freedom in its philosophical sense. Within the tradition of philosophical anthropology, freedom is understood not merely as the capacity to choose among alternatives but as the reflective ability of the human subject to evaluate, direct, and assume responsibility for one's actions. Authentic freedom presupposes a subject capable of critically distancing itself from both external influences and internal impulses that shape human decision-making. Consequently, the abundance of digital choices does not necessarily imply the realization of genuine human autonomy.

This study demonstrates that the meaning of freedom has gradually shifted from reflective autonomy toward the mere experience of choosing within environments already structured by algorithmic systems. Recommendation algorithms, information curation, and mechanisms of digital personalization increasingly configure the epistemic environment in which users perceive reality,

directing attention, shaping preferences, and constructing horizons of meaning. As a result, what appears to be an autonomous decision frequently occurs within a framework of pre-selected possibilities that remains largely invisible to the individual.

This phenomenon suggests that digital freedom is fundamentally mediated freedom a form of freedom exercised within technological systems that simultaneously determine the very conditions under which freedom is experienced. Individuals continue to perceive themselves as autonomous agents because they encounter an abundance of available options. Yet these options have already been organized, prioritized, and filtered according to the logic of data analytics, behavioral prediction, and algorithmic optimization. Freedom therefore persists phenomenologically while becoming increasingly conditioned structurally.

This interpretation resonates with the philosophical position advanced by Franz Magnis-Suseno, who argues that human freedom cannot be separated from rationality, truth, and moral responsibility. Genuine freedom requires the critical capacity to reflect upon both the grounds and the ends of human action rather than merely responding to existing circumstances or immediate impulses. From this perspective, the digital environment presents a new anthropological challenge insofar as the formation of human preferences increasingly occurs beyond the reach of reflective consciousness.

A complementary insight is provided by F. Budi Hardiman, who maintains that the digital sphere should no longer be understood merely as a medium of communication but as a cultural environment that actively shapes the structures of modern consciousness. Reality is no longer encountered directly but is mediated through technological architectures that regulate visibility, prioritize information, and determine relevance. Consequently, human understanding of reality is never entirely neutral; it is increasingly conditioned by digital infrastructures that operate implicitly yet pervasively.

Similarly, Armada Riyanto emphasizes that the human person is fundamentally a relational being whose identity emerges through encounters with others. Within digital society, however, these encounters undergo a significant transformation. Human relationships are increasingly mediated by digital communication systems characterized by speed, selectivity, and fragmentation, thereby shifting interpersonal encounters from existential presence toward functional interaction. Such a transformation inevitably affects not only patterns of communication but also the quality of human relationality itself.

From a historical-anthropological perspective, Yuval Noah Harari argues that the development of algorithms and artificial intelligence introduces an unprecedented historical condition in which human decision-making increasingly relies upon computational analyses that surpass individual cognitive capacities. While this observation captures an important dimension of technological change, the present study identifies a deeper anthropological concern. The central issue lies not merely in the displacement of human decision-making authority but in the internalization of dependency a condition in which human preferences are progressively formed before reflective consciousness has the opportunity to exercise critical judgment.

Accordingly, human freedom is not abolished but undergoes what may be described as epistemic erosion: the gradual weakening of the subject's capacity to understand how its own desires, intentions, and preferences are constituted. Individuals continue to experience themselves as free because digital systems rarely impose explicit coercion. Instead, they operate through convenience, efficiency, personalization, and predictive assistance, making technological influence appear natural and self-evident rather than externally imposed.

This philosophical diagnosis is reinforced by the social teaching of the Catholic Church. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis criticizes the technocratic paradigm, which privileges efficiency, control, and utility as the dominant criteria for interpreting reality

(LS. 106–110). Such a paradigm extends beyond technological practice to reshape humanity's understanding of the world itself, reducing persons, relationships, and creation to functional categories susceptible to technical management. Likewise, *Evangelii Gaudium* warns that contemporary culture fosters the fragmentation of human experience, thereby undermining the unity of meaning within the reflective life of the person (LS. 52–75). Digital environments intensify this fragmentation by presenting information in accelerated, discontinuous, and frequently decontextualized forms.

Moreover, *Dilexit Nos* identifies the human heart as the deepest center of the person the locus where freedom, love, conscience, and moral discernment originate (DN. 9–24). When access to this interior dimension is diminished, human freedom no longer arises primarily from reflective self-possession but increasingly becomes a sequence of responses to constantly changing external stimuli. The Church's contemporary reflections on artificial intelligence further affirm that technological development must remain subordinate to the inherent dignity of the human person as *Imago Dei*. Human beings possess moral agency, self-transcendence, and relational capacities that cannot be reduced to the functional logic of computational systems or algorithmic processes. Technology therefore remains an instrument ordered toward the flourishing of the person rather than the criterion by which humanity itself is defined.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the fundamental paradox of freedom in digital society lies in the widening gap between the expansion of external possibilities and the contraction of internal reflective capacity. Human freedom has not disappeared; rather, it has been reconfigured into a form of procedural freedom that continues to be experienced as autonomy while becoming increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures shaping desire, choice, and self-understanding.

Consequently, the primary crisis of the digital age should not be understood merely as a political or technological crisis of freedom. It is, more fundamentally, a crisis of subjectivity the

progressive weakening of the human person's capacity to recognize and critically appropriate the processes through which the self is formed within the algorithmic architecture of contemporary digital life.

From Homo Sapiens to Homo Digitalis: The Transformation of the Structure of Human Consciousness

The second principal finding of this study demonstrates that the most fundamental transformation in the digital age lies not in the advancement of technological devices themselves, but in the transformation of the very structure of human consciousness. Digital technology can no longer be understood merely as an external instrument employed by human beings to achieve particular objectives. Rather, it has evolved into an existential environment that shapes how individuals perceive the world, understand themselves, and relate to others. Within the horizon of classical philosophical anthropology, the human person is conceived as *Homo sapiens* a rational and reflective being endowed with the capacity to comprehend reality, interpret experience, and consciously evaluate one's actions. This reflective consciousness constitutes the very foundation of human freedom because it enables the subject not only to act but also to understand the reasons underlying those actions and to assume moral responsibility for them.

The findings of this study further reveal that contemporary digital society has gradually transformed this structure of consciousness. Cognitive functions that were once inherent to the human subject are increasingly delegated to external technological systems. Search engines replace the reflective pursuit of knowledge, social media substitutes significant dimensions of direct interpersonal interaction, and artificial intelligence increasingly assumes the functions of analysis, synthesis, and even the production of information. This phenomenon illustrates what may be described as the externalization of cognition, namely the process through which thinking no longer occurs exclusively within the interiority of the human subject but is increasingly distributed across

technological systems. In the long term, this condition influences not only the way human beings think but also the manner in which they understand themselves as thinking subjects.

Within the sphere of education, this tendency is manifested in the epistemological shift from valuing the process of learning toward prioritizing immediate outcomes. Instant access to answers increasingly encourages knowledge to be understood as a ready-made product rather than the result of sustained reflection, dialogue, and rational argumentation. Franz Magnis-Suseno emphasizes that human rationality is not limited to the capacity for thinking but also encompasses morally responsible deliberation (Magnis-Suseno, 2016: 45). When this reflective process is progressively replaced by instantaneous access to information, the epistemic dimension of human freedom is correspondingly diminished. Likewise, F. Budi Hardiman argues that digital space is no longer merely a neutral medium but has developed into an environment that shapes the very way human beings understand reality (Hardiman, 2021: 78–80). Within this environment, reality is no longer encountered directly but through algorithmic mediation that regulates the visibility, relevance, and ordering of information. Consequently, human consciousness no longer confronts reality in its fullness but instead engages with representations of reality that have already been filtered by digital systems.

From a relational perspective, Armada Riyanto maintains that the human person becomes oneself through relationships and encounters with others (Riyanto, 2018: 33). Within the context of digital society, however, these relationships undergo significant transformation because interpersonal encounters are increasingly mediated by communication systems characterized by speed, fragmentation, and representational logic. Relationships therefore no longer take the form of existential presence alone but increasingly become functional and segmented interactions. The findings further indicate that digital structures profoundly reshape the construction of personal identity. Within social media environments, identity is no longer

formed primarily through the coherence of lived experience but through carefully curated processes of self-representation. The phenomenon of false self-representation illustrates the tendency of individuals to project versions of themselves that conform to the expectations of digital audiences. Consequently, identity undergoes a gradual shift from being toward being seen.

Yuval Noah Harari, in his anthropological analysis, argues that the development of artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems creates unprecedented historical conditions in which human decisions are increasingly based upon data analysis that exceeds individual cognitive capacities (Harari, 2015: 120). The present study, however, demonstrates that the more fundamental issue lies not merely in the delegation of decision-making but in the transformation of the very structure of consciousness itself, whereby the formation of human preferences increasingly occurs before reflective consciousness is fully engaged. Under such conditions, human beings do not merely use technology; they are simultaneously shaped by technology in the very way they think. What is taking place, therefore, is not simply the evolution of cognitive tools but a displacement of the locus of consciousness from the interiority of the human subject toward external systems characterized by prediction, adaptation, and algorithmic mediation.

This phenomenon gives rise to what this study conceptualizes as *Homo Digitalis* a new anthropological configuration distinguished by the pervasive dominance of digital mediation across nearly every dimension of human existence. *Homo Digitalis* does not signify a biological transformation but rather an epistemological and existential one, in which human beings become increasingly dependent upon digital systems to understand both the world and themselves. From this perspective, human consciousness no longer functions as an autonomous center of interpretation but is embedded within networks of technological systems that organize experience, direct attention, and structure the interpretation of reality. What is perceived as significant, true, or relevant is therefore no longer

determined solely through internal reflection but increasingly by external structures operating through algorithmic processes.

The social teaching of the Catholic Church provides an important critical framework for interpreting this phenomenon. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis emphasizes that the technocratic paradigm transforms not only the way human beings act but also the way they think and interpret reality (LS, 106–114). Within this paradigm, technology is not value-neutral; rather, it shapes a worldview that tends toward a reductionist understanding of the world. Likewise, *Evangelii Gaudium* observes that contemporary culture generates the fragmentation of human experience, thereby hindering the integration of meaning within a unified horizon of reflection (EG, 52–75). This fragmentation is further intensified by digital structures that present information rapidly, discontinuously, and often without sufficient contextualization.

Meanwhile, *Dilexit Nos* affirms that the heart constitutes the deepest center of the human person, where freedom, love, and moral decision-making are rooted (DN, 9–24). When individuals lose access to this interior dimension, freedom no longer arises from existential reflection but increasingly becomes a response to immediate external stimuli. The Church's reflections on artificial intelligence likewise affirm that technology must always remain within the horizon of human dignity as *imago Dei* a subject endowed with moral, reflective, and relational capacities that cannot be reduced to the logic of technical systems. Based on these findings, this study concludes that the transformation from *Homo sapiens* to *Homo digitalis* represents not merely a technological transition but a profound anthropological transformation that reaches the deepest structures of human consciousness. The principal crisis emerging from this condition is therefore not simply a crisis of external freedom but a crisis of reflective consciousness, manifested in the gradual weakening of humanity's capacity to understand how the self is formed within digitally mediated environments.

Accordingly, the fundamental question of the digital age is no longer simply how human beings should use technology ethically, but whether humanity continues to remain the subject that directs technology, or has instead become the product of the very systems it has created.

Freedom or the Illusion of Freedom? A Critical Hermeneutical Analysis of Digital Subjectivity

The third principal finding of this study demonstrates that the most fundamental challenge confronting digital society does not lie in the proliferation of technology itself, but in the crisis surrounding the very meaning of human freedom. Through a critical hermeneutical reading of contemporary philosophical works and the reflections of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, this study finds that freedom in the digital age exists in an inherently ambivalent condition. It is experienced as an expansion of human autonomy while simultaneously possessing the potential to become an illusion that remains largely imperceptible to the very subjects who experience it. Within contemporary discourse, digital technology is frequently interpreted through the lens of technological optimism. The broader the access to information, the faster the communication, and the more sophisticated the development of artificial intelligence, the greater human freedom is presumed to become. This perspective rests upon the fundamental assumption that freedom is synonymous with the availability of choice. Consequently, the greater the number of available alternatives, the freer the choosing subject is assumed to be. The findings of this study, however, demonstrate that the relationship between choice and freedom is far from linear. An abundance of options does not necessarily produce a deeper form of freedom; on the contrary, it may generate a paradoxical condition in which the subject gradually loses the capacity to reflect upon the very foundations of personal choice. Within this context, freedom shifts from reflective autonomy to the mere experience of choosing within environments that have already been systematically constructed.

Yuval Noah Harari, in *Homo Deus*, argues that the rapid development of algorithms and artificial intelligence has the potential to establish data as a new authority governing human decision-making. Within this emerging horizon, algorithms are even projected to understand human beings better than individuals understand themselves (Harari, 2015: 120). Although this proposition remains hypothetical and prognostic, it exposes a fundamental philosophical question: when human preferences can be systematically predicted, to what extent can human action still be regarded as genuinely free? This question cannot be adequately addressed solely through technological analysis, since it reaches a deeper anthropological dimension concerning the very structure of human subjectivity. From the perspective of Franz Magnis-Suseno, freedom can never be reduced to the mere capacity to choose among alternatives; rather, it concerns the subject's ability to direct oneself according to truth and moral responsibility (Magnis-Suseno, 2016: 45). Freedom, therefore, resides not in the quantity of available choices but in the quality of reflective consciousness through which those choices are made.

Drawing upon this philosophical perspective, the present study identifies a significant transformation in the meaning of freedom within digital society. Freedom is no longer primarily understood as the capacity to direct oneself toward the good through conscious moral deliberation, but increasingly as the ability to access and consume an unlimited range of possibilities rapidly and effortlessly. Consequently, the criterion of freedom undergoes a profound reduction from the quality of reflection to the quantity of available options. This phenomenon is readily observable in everyday digital practices. Individuals may spend hours navigating social media while experiencing themselves as entirely free because they are able to select the content they wish to consume. Structurally, however, such content has already been filtered, prioritized, and recommended through algorithmic systems based upon previous patterns of digital behavior. The subject therefore encounters not a neutral space of choice, but a field

of possibilities that has already been systematically curated.

F. Budi Hardiman argues that digital space cannot be understood as a neutral medium but rather as an environment that fundamentally shapes the manner in which human beings exist and interpret reality (Hardiman, 2021: 78–80). Within such an environment, human consciousness no longer encounters reality directly but rather experiences a world mediated through algorithmic structures regulating the visibility and relevance of information. Consequently, human subjectivity is no longer formed exclusively through interior reflection but increasingly through repeated interaction with systems that subtly shape preferences, direct attention, and construct horizons of meaning. Under these conditions, freedom is not explicitly abolished but is gradually reconstructed through mechanisms that often remain beyond the subject's awareness.

From a relational perspective, Armada Riyanto maintains that the human person can only be fully understood through relationships with others (Riyanto, 2018: 33). Within digital society, however, these relationships undergo a profound transformation. Existential encounters are increasingly replaced by interactions characterized by speed, fragmentation, and representational mediation. Presence gives way to connectivity, while the depth of interpersonal relationships is displaced by the intensity of digital interaction. This transformation produces what may be described as a relational paradox: the greater the degree of connectivity, the lower the possibility of authentic encounter. Within this framework, relational freedom does not expand but instead becomes progressively reduced through relationships increasingly structured by the operational logic of digital platforms.

The findings of this study further demonstrate that the illusion of freedom within digital society is reinforced by psychological and social mechanisms operating through processes of self-representation. Studies of digital behavior consistently indicate that social media environments are dominated by carefully constructed and selectively curated images

of the self. The phenomena of highlight culture and false self-presentation illustrate the tendency of individuals to present idealized versions of themselves in pursuit of social validation. Under such conditions, identity is no longer constituted primarily through the coherence of lived existential experience but through performative processes of representation. Consequently, identity gradually shifts from being toward being seen, where visibility increasingly becomes more significant than authenticity.

Furthermore, research on digital behavior indicates that participation within digital environments is distributed unevenly. The majority of users remain passive consumers, while the production and circulation of public discourse are dominated by relatively small groups possessing significant influence within algorithmic structures. This condition reveals that what appears to be a democratic public sphere is, in reality, profoundly shaped by technological architectures that remain largely invisible. From the standpoint of critical philosophy, this suggests that freedom within digital environments concerns not merely the capacity to choose but also the capacity to recognize and critically examine the structures through which those choices are constituted. When such structures remain hidden from consciousness, freedom risks becoming nothing more than a subjective experience lacking genuine autonomous foundations.

Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, warns that the technocratic paradigm influences not only the use of technology but also the manner in which human beings perceive and interpret reality (LS, 106–114). Technology within this paradigm is never neutral, for it carries with it a logic of efficiency and utility that gradually becomes the dominant framework through which life itself is evaluated. Likewise, in *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis emphasizes that modern humanity faces the risk of losing the heart as the deepest center of human existence the place where freedom, love, and moral decision-making find their origin (DN, 9–24). As this interior dimension gradually weakens, freedom no longer emerges from existential

reflection but increasingly becomes a succession of responses to continuously changing external stimuli. Based upon the foregoing analysis, this study concludes that the illusion of freedom in digital society arises not from the absence of choice but from the subject's inability to recognize how those choices are themselves constituted. In other words, freedom does not disappear directly; rather, it undergoes an ontological transformation, shifting from freedom understood as reflective autonomy toward freedom experienced as a subjective condition that has already been systematically mediated.

Accordingly, the principal crisis of digital society does not consist in the limitation of freedom itself, but in the increasingly blurred distinction between authentic freedom and freedom that has been technologically constructed. Under these conditions, the most fundamental philosophical question is no longer whether human beings remain free, but rather to what extent they are still capable of recognizing the very conditions that make them believe themselves to be free.

Modern Slavery through Algorithms, Convenience, and Voluntary Consent

The fourth principal finding of this study demonstrates that digital society has given rise to a new form of domination that is phenomenologically distinct from classical patterns of slavery. Whereas throughout the history of civilization human domination over others was characterized by physical violence, political coercion, or overt economic exploitation, domination in the digital age operates through far more subtle mechanisms, namely algorithms, the culture of convenience, and forms of consent that appear to be voluntarily given by the very subjects who experience them.

Within this context, freedom is not explicitly abolished but is instead experienced through choices that have already been guided by digital systems. Individuals continue to perceive themselves as autonomous subjects capable of determining their own lives, while the field of possibilities they inhabit has already been constructed through algorithmic

architectures that regulate attention, preferences, and patterns of behavior. Franz Magnis-Suseno argues that human freedom cannot be understood merely as the capacity to do whatever one desires but rather as the ability to direct oneself according to truth and moral responsibility (Magnis-Suseno, 2016: 45). Within this framework, freedom necessarily requires critical reflection upon the impulses, circumstances, and structures that influence human decisions. When such reflection is weakened, freedom does not disappear formally; instead, it gradually loses its ethical substance.

This study finds that digital algorithms function as directive structures operating through the accumulation of users' behavioral data. Every digital activity including online searches, content consumption, social interaction, and even visual preferences is continuously recorded, analyzed, and employed to construct predictive behavioral models. On the basis of these patterns, digital systems generate highly personalized and adaptive informational environments. Under these conditions, human beings no longer encounter the world in its openness but rather a reality that has already been algorithmically filtered. What appears to be freedom of choice is, in fact, freedom exercised within a space that has already been programmed to direct attention toward predetermined possibilities. Domination therefore no longer operates primarily through prohibition but through the regulation of visibility. This phenomenon finds critical support in Pope Francis' reflection on the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'*. He argues that modern technology is never neutral because it always embodies a particular logic that shapes the manner in which human beings understand reality (LS, 106–108). When the logic of efficiency, control, and utility becomes dominant, reality itself tends to be reduced to something that can be calculated, optimized, and managed (LS, 109–111). Within the digital context, this tendency becomes evident in the commodification and optimization of human attention as an increasingly valuable economic resource.

Beyond algorithmic governance, this study also finds that the culture of convenience constitutes

another essential mechanism through which contemporary forms of dependency are established. Digital technologies provide forms of convenience unprecedented in previous generations, including instantaneous access to information, unrestricted communication across time and space, and the automation of numerous intellectual activities through artificial intelligence.

However, as Pope Francis observes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, contemporary culture increasingly encourages patterns of rapid consumption, instant gratification, and the avoidance of processes requiring perseverance and sustained commitment (EG, 52–67). Within digital society, this cultural tendency no longer exists merely as a social preference but is systematically reinforced by technological designs intentionally developed to minimize friction and maximize user satisfaction. As a consequence, a form of subjectivity increasingly dependent upon convenience gradually emerges. Individuals become progressively less capable of enduring delay, uncertainty, and the prolonged reflective processes essential to mature human judgment. Over time, this condition weakens what may be described as the ascetical capacity of thought the human ability to suspend immediate responses in favor of deeper reflection and critical discernment. The findings further indicate that education has not remained immune to this transformation. While the integration of artificial intelligence into academic environments undoubtedly increases the efficiency of accessing information, it simultaneously shifts the orientation of learning from process toward outcome. Knowledge is increasingly understood as something that can be obtained instantaneously rather than as the fruit of sustained intellectual struggle and reflective inquiry.

Within this framework, the human person is no longer positioned primarily as a subject who constructs knowledge but increasingly as a consumer of accelerated information. Consequently, the capacities for critical and reflective thinking which constitute the very foundation of intellectual freedom gradually undergo erosion. A similar tendency is

evident within digital social environments. Studies of media behavior consistently demonstrate that social media platforms are dominated by carefully curated constructions of personal identity. The practice of false self-presentation illustrates how individuals consciously construct representations of themselves adapted to the expectations of digital audiences in order to obtain social validation.

F. Budi Hardiman argues that digital space has become a new existential environment shaping the manner in which human beings understand both themselves and the world (Hardiman, 2021: 78–80). Within this environment, identity is no longer formed primarily through interior reflection but increasingly through visibility and public recognition. Personal worth is progressively measured through quantitative indicators such as followers, interactions, and digital engagement. From a relational perspective, Armada Riyanto emphasizes that the human person is fundamentally a being who discovers oneself through relationships with others (Riyanto, 2018: 33). Within digital society, however, relationships undergo a profound transformation into forms of connectivity characterized by speed and fragmentation. Encounter is replaced by interaction, depth by intensity, and presence by representation.

Consequently, despite existing within extensive networks of connectivity, individuals increasingly experience the paradox of loneliness. Relationships, which ought to constitute spaces for the formation of meaning, are gradually transformed into arenas for the consumption of attention. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that algorithmic domination is reinforced through the mechanism of voluntary consent. Individuals consciously choose to participate in digital platforms because of the benefits they offer, including convenience, speed, entertainment, and connectivity. Such consent, however, is fundamentally paradoxical because it is granted under conditions in which subjects do not fully comprehend the long-term implications of the digital structures they willingly enter.

Accordingly, domination within digital society no longer assumes the form of external coercion but

rather that of the voluntary internalization of systems governing everyday life. Human beings are not forced to use technology; instead, they actively choose to remain within technological environments even when those very choices gradually diminish their reflective capacities and personal autonomy. This reflection finds its theological foundation in *Gaudium et Spes*, which affirms that human dignity is grounded in freedom exercised consciously and responsibly (GS, 17). Likewise, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that freedom attains its fullest truth only when it is directed toward the objective good rather than toward merely subjective satisfaction (KGK, 1731–1733). From this perspective, any structure that systematically weakens humanity's capacity for critical reflection may rightly be understood as a threat to the dignity of the human person. This concern is further deepened in *Dilexit Nos*, where Pope Francis warns that contemporary humanity risks losing its deepest center of interiority the heart which is the source of freedom, love, and moral decision-making (DN, 9–24). As individuals become increasingly immersed in the logic of algorithms and digital convenience, the transformation they undergo is not merely behavioral but profoundly existential.

Based upon the foregoing analysis, this study concludes that modern slavery within digital society does not operate through the abolition of freedom but through the reconstruction of freedom itself. Freedom is not eliminated; rather, it is transformed into an experience that remains fully compatible with digital systems regulating human attention, preferences, and decisions. Consequently, the principal crisis of digital society lies not in the explicit loss of freedom but in humanity's inability to recognize the new forms of domination operating through convenience, algorithmic governance, and voluntary consent. Under these conditions, slavery no longer requires chains, for human beings themselves have gradually become integral components of the very systems that govern their freedom.

From Homo Sapiens to Homo Sapiens Sapiens: Wisdom as the Future of Humanity

The final finding of this study demonstrates that the fundamental challenge confronting digital society cannot ultimately be reduced to technological advancement alone but culminates in a more profound anthropological problem, namely, the crisis of wisdom. Having examined the paradox of modern human freedom, the transformation of consciousness toward Homo Digitalis, and the emergence of new forms of domination operating through algorithms, convenience, and voluntary consent, this study argues that the greatest challenge of the twenty-first century is not the unprecedented expansion of technology but humanity's diminishing capacity to direct such progress wisely. Accordingly, the principal crisis of digital society is not a crisis of intelligence but a crisis of wisdom.

Throughout the long history of human civilization, every major technological breakthrough has been accompanied by an expansion of human capacities. Language expanded communication, writing extended memory, machines amplified physical labor, the internet broadened access to knowledge, and artificial intelligence has significantly enhanced analytical capabilities and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, this study finds that the expansion of human capability is not automatically synonymous with the deepening of human flourishing. Modern civilization has succeeded in constructing increasingly sophisticated technological systems, yet it has not necessarily succeeded in forming human beings who are correspondingly wiser in their use of those systems. Consequently, a profound imbalance emerges between knowing more and understanding better, between the accumulation of information and the cultivation of reflective wisdom.

This phenomenon is readily observable in the everyday life of digital society. Contemporary individuals inhabit an environment saturated with information while simultaneously experiencing increasing difficulty in discerning meaning. Access to knowledge has become virtually limitless, yet the capacity to distinguish information from

interpretation, and interpretation from wisdom, has failed to develop proportionately. This condition gives rise to an epistemological paradox: humanity knows ever more about the world while understanding progressively less about itself and the direction of its own existence. Yuval Noah Harari, in *Homo Deus*, anticipated this transformation by arguing that algorithms and data-driven systems possess the potential to become new authorities in human decision-making (Harari, 2018, hlm. 426–432). Within the framework of dataism, decisions increasingly emerge not from human reflection but from systemic calculations regarded as more accurate and efficient (Harari, 2018, hlm. 438–451). Nevertheless, this study argues that the more fundamental issue lies not in the capabilities of algorithms themselves but in humanity's growing tendency to surrender its reflective and ethical capacities to technological systems.

From the perspective of Franz Magnis-Suseno, human freedom can never be understood merely as the ability to choose among alternatives but rather as the capacity for self-determination grounded in truth and moral responsibility (Magnis-Suseno, 1987, hlm. 22–24). Consequently, freedom necessarily presupposes wisdom as the interior condition enabling human beings to distinguish between what is genuinely true and what is merely possible. Without wisdom, freedom deteriorates into the illusion of choice a condition in which individuals believe themselves to be autonomous while their decisions have already been shaped by external structures that remain largely beyond their awareness. It is precisely this widening gap between technological intelligence and moral wisdom that constitutes the critical condition of digital society. Modern technology continues to expand human capabilities across nearly every dimension of life, yet it does not automatically deepen humanity's reflective capacities. As a result, contemporary humanity finds itself in a paradoxical situation: the greater its technological power, the greater its risk of losing its own existential orientation.

Within this context, wisdom can no longer be regarded as an optional human virtue but must

instead be understood as the anthropological foundation that determines the proper orientation of technological development. Wisdom is not merely a cognitive ability but an existential capacity to situate knowledge within broader horizons of meaning, ethics, and the ultimate purpose of human life. Without this dimension, knowledge loses its orientation and becomes little more than an accumulation of data devoid of existential significance.

The findings further demonstrate that digital transformation affects not only the structure of knowledge but also the structure of human relationships. F. Budi Hardiman, in *Aku Klik Maka Aku Ada*, argues that digital space has become a new existential environment fundamentally shaping human consciousness (Hardiman, 2021, hlm. 17–21). Human identity is increasingly constructed not through interior reflection and authentic interpersonal relationships but through digital exposure dependent upon public recognition (Hardiman, 2021, hlm. 53–61). Under these conditions, human existence gradually shifts from being toward being seen from authentic existence to visibility. This transformation gives rise to a subtle crisis of identity. The more intensely individuals present themselves within digital environments, the more dependent they become upon external validation. Consequently, freedom of expression in digital spaces does not necessarily correspond to existential freedom; rather, it may evolve into a new and increasingly subtle mechanism of dependency.

From the perspective of Armada Riyanto's relational anthropology, the human person can never be understood as a closed and autonomous subject but always exists through relationships with others (Riyanto, 2018, hlm. 103–120). Relationship is not an additional characteristic of the human person but the very structure of human existence. Within digital society, however, relationships are increasingly reduced to connectivity. Connectivity privileges accessibility, speed, and quantity, whereas authentic relationships require depth, presence, and responsibility. When connectivity replaces relationship, humanity encounters an existential

paradox: the more connected individuals become, the lonelier they ultimately are.

Viewed through the lens of the Church's social teaching, this condition reveals a profound anthropological crisis. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, emphasizes that the technocratic paradigm transforms not only the ways human beings employ technology but also the ways they understand themselves and reality (LS, 106–114). The prevailing logic of efficiency, productivity, and control carries the risk of reducing the human person to little more than function and performance. Likewise, in *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis argues that the deepest crisis of the modern world is the loss of humanity's interior center the heart as the source of wisdom, love, and authentic freedom (DN, 9–24).

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, this study proposes the anthropological horizon of *Homo sapiens sapiens* as both a critique and a corrective to the reduction of modern humanity into a merely technological *Homo sapiens*. *Homo sapiens sapiens* does not signify biological or technological enhancement but rather the reflective and ethical deepening of humanity's relationship with its own knowledge. It designates a human being who not only possesses knowledge (knowing) but also understands the very act of knowing (knowing that he knows), and who is capable of situating knowledge within the broader horizon of wisdom. Accordingly, the future of humanity will be determined not primarily by the increasing sophistication of artificial intelligence systems but by humanity's capacity to cultivate the wisdom necessary to accompany such technological progress. The world may continue advancing toward systems that are increasingly automated, predictive, and efficient. Yet without wisdom, these developments risk losing their genuinely human orientation. Conversely, if wisdom remains the fundamental principle guiding technological development, technology will continue to exist within its proper vocation as a servant of humanity rather than its substitute.

Therefore, the greatest challenge confronting digital society is not the creation of machines that

increasingly resemble human beings, but the preservation of humanity itself. In a world progressively governed by data and algorithms, the most profound form of resistance is not the rejection of technology but the enduring capacity to think critically, to love authentically, and to act freely and responsibly. At precisely this point, *Homo sapiens sapiens* emerges not merely as an anthropological concept but as an ethical and spiritual horizon for the future of human civilization.

Between Prometheus and Imago Dei: Choosing the Future of Humanity

The final finding of this study demonstrates that the entire dynamic of digital society cannot ultimately be understood merely as a process of technological development but must instead be interpreted as a profound anthropological struggle. Having examined the paradox of freedom, the transformation of consciousness toward *Homo Digitalis*, the emergence of algorithmic domination, and the necessity of wisdom as a corrective to technological supremacy, this study concludes that the central question of the digital age converges upon a single fundamental inquiry: what kind of human being is contemporary technological civilization shaping and preserving?

This question becomes increasingly significant because the digital revolution not only expands humanity's capacity to transform the world but also begins to reshape the way human beings understand themselves. Whereas the Industrial Revolution primarily concerned humanity's mastery over nature, the digital revolution penetrates a deeper dimension by governing human attention, behavior, preferences, emotions, and even moral decision-making. Within this context, technology can no longer be regarded merely as an external instrument but has become the very medium through which the structure of human existence is constituted.

From a symbolic-philosophical perspective, this tension may be understood through two paradigmatic figures: Prometheus and Imago Dei. In Greek mythology, Prometheus symbolizes humanity's transgressive aspiration to transcend its

own limits through the appropriation of the "fire of knowledge" belonging to the gods. He represents progress, emancipation, and the triumph of technical rationality over nature. By contrast, the Christian doctrine of Imago Dei affirms that human dignity is not determined by the capacity to dominate reality but by the truth that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (bdk. Gen.. 1:26–27). Consequently, human beings are not called to become "new gods," but rather to live in relationships characterized by responsibility and openness toward the Creator.

Within contemporary digital society, these two paradigms no longer remain merely theoretical constructs but actively shape the ways human beings understand themselves. On the one hand, technological optimism maintains that nearly every human limitation can ultimately be overcome through digital innovation, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence. Diseases may be predicted through algorithms, decisions optimized through data analytics, and even human cognitive and biological capacities enhanced through technological engineering. Within this horizon, the future of humanity is envisioned as an unlimited process of enhancement leading toward increasingly superior forms of existence.

Yuval Noah Harari interprets this tendency as the emergence of the *Homo Deus* project the aspiration whereby humanity is no longer satisfied with remaining *Homo sapiens* but instead seeks to assume functions traditionally regarded as transcendent through the power of technology and data (Harari, 2018, hlm. 426–432). Within the framework of dataism, authority in decision-making gradually shifts from human reflection to algorithmic systems considered more objective and efficient (Harari, 2018, hlm. 438–451). Consequently, the human person ceases to be the ultimate center of decision-making and instead becomes one component within a larger technological system governing human existence.

This study argues, however, that such Promethean optimism contains a profound anthropological paradox. The more humanity strives

to expand its power over both the world and itself, the greater the danger of losing an authentic understanding of its own identity. As reality becomes progressively reduced to technical categories such as efficiency, performance, speed, and optimization, human beings simultaneously begin to reduce themselves to measurable, calculable, and optimizable entities. Under such conditions, the human person is no longer understood as a meaningful mystery but rather as a system to be managed.

Pope Francis identifies this tendency in *Laudato Si'* as the dominance of the technocratic paradigm, a mode of thinking that assumes every problem can ultimately be resolved through technical and instrumental rationality (LS, 106–114). Within this paradigm, the world is no longer perceived as creation deserving reverence but rather as an object to be controlled. The same logic is subsequently applied to humanity itself, leading individuals to understand themselves primarily according to utility and performance. Consequently, human dignity risks being reduced to mere functionality.

This critique resonates with the reflection of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus*, where he emphasizes that technological progress can never be automatically equated with moral progress (CA, 37–38). Without an authentic ethical orientation, technical advancement may itself become a threat to humanity. Similarly, Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, argues that technology is never neutral because it always embodies a particular vision of the human person and humanity's ultimate purpose (CV, 69–71). Therefore, the decisive question is not what technology is capable of accomplishing, but rather what kind of human beings are formed through its use.

From a philosophical perspective, Franz Magnis-Suseno argues that human beings never become truly free merely because they possess the capacity to accomplish whatever they desire. Authentic freedom always presupposes an orientation toward truth and moral responsibility (Magnis-Suseno, 1987, hlm. 22–24). Consequently, the greater humanity's technological capabilities

become, the greater the corresponding responsibility to cultivate moral wisdom so that such capabilities do not lose their ethical orientation.

Furthermore, Magnis-Suseno emphasizes that every human person possesses an intrinsic dignity that can never be reduced to an instrument serving other interests (hlm. 75–79). Within digital society, this warning becomes especially significant as human data, attention, emotions, and behavior are increasingly commodified within economic systems. Human beings are no longer merely subjects who employ technology; they increasingly risk becoming objects employed by technological systems themselves.

From the perspective of relational anthropology, Armada Riyanto argues that the human person becomes fully oneself only through relationships with others (Riyanto, 2018, hlm. 103–120). Relationship is not an accidental dimension of human existence but its very ontological structure. Within digital society, however, authentic relationships are increasingly replaced by connectivity. Connectivity privileges accessibility and speed, whereas genuine relationships require presence, depth, and responsibility. This transformation produces a profound relational crisis in which individuals become increasingly connected technologically while simultaneously becoming increasingly fragile existentially.

In the light of Sacred Scripture, this dynamic may be interpreted through the narrative of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), understood as a symbol of humanity's ambition to achieve unity and power through a technological project centered exclusively upon itself. Babel's fundamental error did not consist in technological construction itself but in the absolutization of human capability at the expense of recognizing humanity's own existential limits. By contrast, the paradigm of *Imago Dei* affirms that human fulfillment is found not through domination but through relationship with the God who created humanity (bdk. Ps. 8:5–6).

The fullest expression of this paradigm is revealed in Christology. Whereas Prometheus symbolizes humanity's attempt to ascend toward

divinity through power and domination, Christ reveals the God who humbles Himself by becoming human through love and self-emptying (Phil. 2:6–8). Accordingly, these two paradigms differ not merely conceptually but ontologically: Prometheus is centered upon power, whereas Christ is centered upon love.

Based upon the foregoing analysis, this study concludes that the future of civilization will not be determined by technology's victory over human limitation but rather by an anthropological choice concerning the kind of humanity that ought to be preserved. The decisive struggle of the digital age is therefore not between human beings and machines but between two competing visions of humanity itself: the Promethean anthropology, which emphasizes unlimited mastery and self-transcendence, and the anthropology of *Imago Dei*, which affirms human dignity, relationality, and humanity's openness toward God.

Accordingly, the future of humanity will not ultimately be determined by the sophistication of algorithms but by the existential courage to choose what it truly means to be human. In a world increasingly governed by technology, the most radical question is not what technology can do to humanity but whether humanity is still willing to live as beings capable of authentic relationship, genuine love, profound reflection, and morally responsible action before God and one another.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that human freedom in the digital age exists within an existential paradox. On the one hand, the rapid advancement of digital technologies, social media, and artificial intelligence has significantly expanded humanity's access to information, communication, and an unprecedented range of life possibilities. On the other hand, these technological developments have simultaneously generated new forms of dependency that operate subtly through algorithms, digital culture, the attention economy, and the pervasive logic of convenience embedded in everyday life. Within this context, freedom can no longer be understood

quantitatively as the mere abundance of available choices but must instead be conceived qualitatively as the human capacity to remain a conscious, reflective, and morally responsible subject capable of directing oneself toward truth and the common good.

This study further argues that the fundamental challenge of digital society is not primarily technological but anthropological. In the contemporary digital environment, technology no longer functions merely as a neutral external instrument but has evolved into an existential environment that actively shapes the ways human beings think, interpret reality, construct identity, and make decisions. Under these conditions, what this study identifies as the illusion of freedom emerges a condition in which individuals experience themselves as increasingly autonomous while their consciousness, attention, and preferences are subtly configured by digital mechanisms operating beyond the horizon of critical reflection.

Accordingly, this study affirms that the future of humanity will not ultimately be determined by the increasing sophistication of technological systems but by humanity's capacity to preserve and cultivate wisdom, relationality, and its inherent dignity as *imago Dei*. Authentic freedom is therefore not synonymous with the absence of limits or the multiplication of choices; rather, it consists in the existential capacity to orient oneself consciously toward truth, goodness, and love through morally responsible action.

Finally, this study recommends that future research adopt empirical approaches to investigate more concretely how algorithms, artificial intelligence, and digital ecosystems shape the lived experience of human freedom in everyday life. Such empirical inquiry would complement and extend the present philosophical-theological analysis by providing field-based verification of its conceptual arguments, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of human freedom within contemporary digital society.

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