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Beyond Intelligence: Why Artificial Systems Cannot Possess Wisdom

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining feature of modern society. Advances in technology have driven the modern digital revolution, expanding its capability and scope (Schwab 2017; Turing 1950). AI is highly proficient in processing and applying information from online sources, yet concerns remain regarding its inability to engage in deep, reflective reasoning. This raises the question of whether AI can replicate wisdom. Although AI can expand knowledge and simulate intelligent behavior, it cannot possess true wisdom, as wisdom depends on emotional depth, ethical judgment, and lived experience. As a result, AI requires human guidance to remain aligned with the common good (Jeste et al. 993–995). The distinction between intelligence and wisdom becomes increasingly important, requiring humans to maintain original and ethical thinking. This distinction is especially significant in Catholic thought, where wisdom involves engaging with truths that cannot be fully calculated or known.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Intelligence is commonly defined as a general mental capability involving reasoning, problem-solving, and learning from experience (Gottfredson 13). Intelligence is measured using standardized assessments, the Stanford-Binet and WAIS (Terman and Merrill 1960; Wechsler

2008; Silverman et al. 2010). AI replicates human intelligence in areas such as pattern recognition and data processing. AI has grown to exceed human intelligence (Jeste et al. 996; Minsky 1991). Many people can be smart, yet not wise. A child is rarely referred to as wise. An elder is often described as wise due to a lifetime of experiences, yet they may not be inherently "smart" in the academic sense.

Wisdom is a distinct construct with growing empirical research on the topic since the 1970s (Jeste and Lee, 2019). Wisdom is a complex trait that includes emotional regulation, empathy, self-reflection, and navigation of uncertainty (Jeste et al. 997). Wisdom incorporates cognitive and emotional dimensions, whereas intelligence is primarily cognitive. Wisdom has been associated with improved well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction (Bergsma and Ardelt 2012; Ardelt 1997). In sports, leadership, and relationships, intelligence can fail, and only wisdom can build a person up. Wisdom is not memorization or understanding, but deeper comprehension and the ability to reason, shaped by experience.

Knowledge is the accumulation of information, and wisdom is the ability to apply that information in ethical and contextual ways. High levels of intelligence do not correlate with or cause happiness or good decision-making (Ali et al. 2013). Wisdom integrates positive social behavior, tying it strongly to societal well-being (Jeste et al. 994). Wisdom enables individuals to address complex human problems, such as loneliness, more than intelligence alone (Lee et al. 2019). The American education system often prioritizes intelligence and knowledge accumulation over the development of wisdom. This has led to less original thinking and creativity, ultimately harming growth. People are inclined to take shortcuts and present themselves as knowledgeable, rather than actually developing understanding through experience.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: CAPABILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

AI's strengths include rapid data analysis, predictive modeling, and scalability (Reddy et al. 2019; Grassi et al. 2018). In domains, AI systems can outperform humans. Two instances are pattern recognition and information storage (Jeste et al. 998). Limitations include: lack of subjective experience, emotional understanding, and ability to model human intentions (Leslie 1987; Jeste et al. 998). AI relies on rules and data, not ethical reasoning or contextual judgment (Graham et al. 2019a). Humans often trust technology because it is easy, and people tend to default toward convenience. AI can still make mistakes, as it can miscalculate and misjudge situations without truly understanding them.

Wisdom requires consciousness, autonomy, and lived experience, qualities that AI does not possess (Buttazzo 2001; Leslie 1987). The most advanced AI (AGI or superintelligence) will lack intrinsic moral awareness acquired through human life (Bostrom 2014). Suffering, failure, and growth are all part of the process of becoming wise. AI may be capable of simulating wise behavior, but cannot be wise, since it lacks internal reflection and moral agency (Jeste et al. 999). Social media and AI have contributed to confusion between intelligence, knowledge, and wisdom. Social media has normalized a lack of deep thinking, while AI provides an easy way to avoid learning independently. It is easier to rely on AI for "intelligence," further blurring the distinction between truly understanding something and simply accessing information.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Artificial Wisdom (AW) is aimed at integrating ethical and human-centered principles into the technology (Jeste et al. 1000). The three principles of AW include learning from experience, demonstrating empathy, and supporting emotional regulation (François-Lavet et al.

2018; Lee et al. 2020). Early AW-like applications include social robots and emotional support technologies (Voss et al. 2019; Hao et al. 2019). While AW incorporates elements associated with wisdom, it does not represent a fundamentally new form of intelligence, but rather an extension of existing AI systems designed to produce human-like outcomes. These systems simulate empathy, ethical reasoning, and emotional awareness to improve decision-making and well-being in applied settings. Artificial Wisdom can be understood as a conceptual reframing of AI rather than a distinct breakthrough, emphasizing outcomes that resemble wisdom without possessing its underlying qualities. A simulation of empathy is not genuine empathy, which develops through lived emotional and ethical experience. Because of this, it remains unrealistic to expect a computational system to embody wisdom.

As AI becomes dominant in processing knowledge, humans must take on the roles of coding, ethical reasoning, and moral judgment. Wisdom cannot be replicated, as it is shaped through lived experience, social context, and emotional depth. Interdisciplinary collaboration in ethics, neuroscience, and engineering is crucial to responsibly guiding AI development (Jeste et al. 1000). Humans have always been responsible for moral judgment, but now they are tasked with instilling that into a computational machine.

This emphasis on moral responsibility is reflected in philosophical and religious traditions that link wisdom to ethical judgment and human dignity. In Catholic tradition, wisdom is not understood as knowledge or intelligence, but as the ability to discern truth and act in accordance with the common good. Contemporary Catholic leaders, including Pope Francis, have similarly emphasized that technological advancement must remain grounded in human dignity and moral responsibility, particularly in the face of rapidly developing artificial

intelligence systems. Wisdom is not merely an intellectual capacity but a moral orientation that ensures knowledge is used in the service of humanity rather than at its expense. The passion to seek meaning in something that may never be fully understood reflects a desire for wisdom. This is present in religious life, where faith requires not just knowledge, but trust, reflection, and moral commitment.

AI raises ethical risks such as decision-making without moral accountability and a lack of regulation (Müller and Bostrom 2016). As AI flourishes, human oversight must ensure AI promotes well-being rather than harm. Wisdom is the key factor in achieving societal flourishing, not intelligence (Jeste et al. 994). AI should function as a tool guided by human wisdom, rather than a decision-maker. High levels of information retention do not directly correlate with good decision-making, whereas lived and learned experiences do. Decision-making becomes more complex when emotion and ethics are involved, requiring depth that AI cannot replicate.

CONCLUSION

AI is highly effective in processing knowledge but lacks the emotional, ethical, and reflective capacities required for wisdom. While it can simulate intelligent behavior, it cannot achieve genuine wisdom. If society confuses intelligence with wisdom, there is a risk of prioritizing efficiency over meaning and convenience over growth. True progress depends not on what we know, but on how we choose to apply it. The future of AI development depends on integrating its computational strengths with human wisdom to ensure ethical and beneficial outcomes.

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