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**An Ethical Approach to the Issues and Challenges of the “Digital
Age”.**

***Introductory Reflections: “Digital Age”: the Paradoxal Culture of
Process and the Instantaneous’***

The expression “digital age”, which endeavours to express the “digital revolution” and its consequences on our way of thinking, bears an interesting resemblance to the concept of “artificial intelligence”: both have a programmatic and, by nature, provisional quality.

For at least the past two generations, this “age” in which we live is also a new way of thinking, characterized by its relation to time, to the purpose of knowledge and the transmission of knowledge, which all seem to be in constant motion between instantaneity and process. We could say that we never finish this “processing of information”, by which this “digital era” is defined: information is received and quickly classified and transmitted, transforming through this continuous process the relationship that we have established with knowledge in general (orig. Fr.: *avec nos savoirs*), our application/practices (orig. Fr.: *nos pratiques*) and even with our personal knowledge (orig. Fr.: *notre*

connaissance), that is, our relationship with reality, with the past and with the future.

The provisional quality of both the “digital age” and digital culture carries with it a challenge that reminds us of the ambitious projects of encyclopaedic European thinkers of the 18th century, who dreamed of embracing in a single book – in an encyclopaedia – the entire sum of knowledge and know-how.

This culture, characterized by the incessant growth of knowledge and techniques, questions the very relationship of subject and instrument, as well as the very notion of knowledge. To be more direct: [it examines] the very relationship between science and consciousness, between the “I know” and the “we are” and, without a doubt, with the “becoming”, to the extent in which we become what we share. The matter of the common good is directly related to the question of sharing our knowledge (orig. Fr.: *nos savoirs*) and our understanding (orig. Fr.: *nos connaissances*).

In this, questions concerning the “digital age” and artificial intelligence intersect and are mutually asked. For this reason, it appears clear that intelligence no longer develops without the mediation of the instrument, which organizes the data and has the decisive ability to arrange it in one way or another. We can therefore note that the “digital age” is marked by many questions, both epistemological and ethical, that seem to centre around one specific and important inquiry: has intelligence now reduced the production of our instruments? And is this production of knowledge now developing by itself, without our involvement or our constant “concern” for the path it is undertaking? In effect, our computers continue to function without us being there to control them...

The rapport between the two concepts of intelligence and instrument continually surprises us. An instrument, by definition, is an active elaboration that allows for the material expression of an idea or plan to be possible. Can it be freed from the subject that created it and makes use of it? Is it possible to say that an instrument can return to its creator in order to explain to him how it is supposed to function? or even to correct (or improve) the intention of the creator and take him further than his own thought had taken him ...? Without a doubt, something similar is playing out before us in this present day in terms of

the expansion of our knowledge and its purpose. The instrument already has the capacity to solicit its inventor – that is, the one who had conceived it and who, in constructing it, made it function – to discover possibilities he didn't necessarily envision until now.

Does the modern dualistic scheme that distinguishes between conscious substance and material substance find its limit here? Is intelligence not proper of human beings, *par excellence*? Is the instrument not, by definition, an object – that is, a product of intelligence? What becomes of this approach that distinguishes both subject and object, when the latter seems capable of initiating, transforming and controlling “inanimate” matter by itself?

More than ever today, the fundamental question regarding the evolution of human and instrumental capacities is, without a doubt, the question of the definition of what we call intelligence. What is this intelligence? and what is this intelligence, understood as a characteristic of our humanity? Up until today, there were three ways to respond to this delicate and complex question:

1. Intelligence is discovery, that is, the capacity to name, distinguish and understand: in other words, to take separately and to put together; to organize, giving a concrete place to every element and every event.

2. Intelligence is the capacity to interpret reality, both material and imaginary (in the various meanings of the term ‘interpret’): marking it, understanding it and prioritizing the place and role of things and beings, of constructions and of knowledge (orig. Fr.: *des savoirs*).

3. Intelligence is knowledge (orig. Fr.: *connaissance*): that is, the future of those who discover and transform, who dream and who hope. Here, to know is to be “born with” (orig. Fr.: “*naître avec*”); in other words, to be re-born with those things that one discovers; to open to what is unexpected in life and within history.

To discover, to interpret, to know... In the strict sense of these terms, this triple function cannot be proper to the instrument, but is rather proper to the seeker. Can the created instrument, whose task is to repeat what has been imprinted among its possibilities, become in turn the one who seeks?

The question must be examined further: is it possible to create an object that, in the manner of a researcher, has the capacity to constantly correct and interpret the hypotheses, the data and the products of its knowledge (orig. Fr.: *savoirs*)? is it possible to create an object that is open to new data and is capable of analysing it, changing in this way both reality and history? What once was fiction, now is beginning to play out before us. It is enough to note the modern capabilities of gathering information and recording data exponentially. And the data itself, which has been organized and protected, is subject to constant modification, amplification and reorganization. That is what we know today: for one, the enormous possibilities of information technology and, even more so, the great potential that algorithms can generate.

The issue of intelligence, both as a history of knowledge (orig. Fr.: *histoires des savoirs*) and the questions regarding the status and issues of knowledge (orig. Fr.: *connaissance*), displaces traditional considerations regarding the relationship between subject and object, which has marked both classical and modern evolution and the mastery of humankind over nature and over matter.

Indeed, the question is one of knowledge: who speaks to whom? (This is undeniably the current issue that we can note in communication over social networks). In such a confrontation between the discoverer and the data, between the discoverers themselves, three questions arise that structure the approach of ethics:

- 1. What does it mean to be a subject (or actor)?**
- 2. What does it mean to be responsible and to undertake the challenges of knowledge (orig. Fr.: *savoir*), placed under the double mark of immediacy and obsolescence?**
- 3. What about the reference to the “common good” in the context of the digital world’s impatience, which seems to lack the necessary patience required in the process of building a common world?**

- 1. What does it mean to “be a subject”, and who is the actor in history?**

Upon asking ourselves what is the status of the subject, we must above all ask ourselves regarding the author; that is, about the one who makes reality, knowledge and know-how (orig. Fr.: *du réel, du savoir et du savoir-faire*), a “knowledge” (orig. Fr.: *une “connaissance”*), that is, both an interpretation and a transmission. In the digital age, to reflect upon the relationship between subject and object is to reflect upon what is the notion of tradition and the notion of transmission in the context of uninterrupted communication of knowledge, where both tradition and transmission are so strongly present in the consideration of responsibility. Inevitably, this dynamic poses a question regarding the role of memory and of belonging to a community. And it is certainly not a coincidence that these two categories (i.e.: of memory and belonging to a community) are both in crisis and in re-discovery in today’s world. The subject, of whom we are speaking of, is affirmed by memory and hope, not only through ritual but perhaps above all because they are, as a mortal being, constantly moving along a path. Knowledge is a path that leads us from birth to death; from the thought of being born to the complex thought of dying...

What becomes of the subject in the digital age? While some seek others through the use of data and messages more or less anonymously or in code, others intend to assert themselves through direct digital power, thereby asserting their own influence over the opinions and thoughts of others. In effect, they are captured by the hunt of one piece of information after another, so as to reach the extreme of not being able to believe anything, except for what is said at a precise instantaneous moment. The criteria of truth, in this way, is reduced to that of an instant.

The tension that this evokes upon memory and hope is found at the heart of the digital culture, which seems to make constant reference to these two anchors (memory and hope) – which are subjective – as the dwelling of moral authority and as a place of mutual acknowledgement...

From here comes the ethical question, *par excellence*: **What does it mean to be responsible for and to undertake the challenges and consequences of this knowledge and this language, in a context marked two-fold by both immediacy and obsolescence (a paradox between the primacy of mediation and that of the immediate)?**

2. Being responsible for and undertaking the challenges of knowledge, marked two-fold by both immediacy and obsolescence.

Emphasizing that there can be no thought regarding responsibility which, at the same time, is not fundamentally a thought regarding time and the 'other' (taking up in this way two major referential concepts: that of Emmanuel Lévinas, and the reflections of Paul Ricoeur), contemporary ethics have brought to light the issue of an inscription of knowledge and know-how (orig. Fr.: *du savoir et des savoir-faire*) in a temporality that makes the discernment between the possible and the preferable conceivable, and an otherness (orig. Fr.: *une alterité*) that places the other and others at the heart of knowledge and action. There exists no ethics of responsibility without a reference to the memorial relationship of the road travelled together and to the aspiration towards a better common future "with and for another", that is, together.

Here lies the challenge: to live moral responsibility means to respond directly to the other person; it means to refuse the reduction of one's actions or one's words to mere information or to simple provocation – that the information must be either just or voluntarily false (i.e.: fake news). Knowledge engages the future and commits us to reply to what we are and to what we create, keeping in mind both the present and future generations. In this perspective, the common good appears as a constant concern for our future. Yet, we are aware that this becoming is – at the same time – a promise, a sharing, and the experience of a common vulnerability. The incessant movement of informative knowledge may exhaust both word and silence, both of which are inherent to encounter and to ethical discernment... Word is a crucial element in ethics and in social life, in the measure in which we are present in what we say; in the measure in which we encounter one another through the words we express and give each other.

3. One can, therefore, speak of a paradoxal ethical context where digital impatience intersects with the necessary patience required in the process of building a common good...

By insisting on the relationship to time, and considering the double category of memory and hope – or, from the perspective of faith, of the hope that opens us to the One, who comes – we touch upon the sore point of the

digital culture, which is renewed constantly by the mutation of knowledge and technique, and which shifts the points of reference by which humanity attempts to express “the way, the truth and the life”.

We conscientiously make use of this trilogy, found in the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, by which Christ presents Himself to the Apostle Philip. There, the Disciple asks the Lord what path one must take to follow Him wherever He goes in the fulfilment of His mission. One could say that the instrument “produces” a truth that is always random. This instrument can sometimes even take the place of the truth, risking the reduction of hope to the single movement of uninterrupted thought. In this situation, what then becomes of our hope and our life, which in Christian belief are fulfilled in the love of Christ and in the love of our neighbour?

The common good is understood as the sharing of goods received or transmitted; it can also be understood as the good of the community, which enriches itself through sharing... This common good, which we are still trying to understand, can be reduced to the simple exchange of information if we forgo memory and concern for the future. Therefore, the common good is not only a collection or the augmentation of the goods we have in common (techniques, products or even knowledge) and which have been passed down from generation to generation. The common good is a sharing and an interpretation of the promise inscribed in each subject. It is like bread that one shares; like the country for whom we seek the best path; like the promised land of mutual acknowledgement and ultimate understanding of what is given us, once more and always in a limited way.

Thus, paradoxically, the reference to the common good calls for patience... the patience of wisdom (which evaluates) and of faith (which is always open to the Other), against a backdrop of digital impatience... Perhaps, here, we can see the intuition of Pope Francis, when he evokes: “Time is greater than space” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 222 – 225). The space of the digital canvas does not dispense us from thinking of and from living the encounter. And the common good – the planet, the environment, our home, our shared activity – can only find its profound sense in the encounter.

Without a doubt, “the culture of encounter” allows for the reconciliation of digital impatience with the patience necessary in the process of building the common good through patient listening, comprehension and, ultimately, love

for one another. It is, therefore, a formidable ethical challenge: to write – and to rewrite continually – the development of our knowledge in the construction of a human community, open to the transcendence of otherness (orig. Fr.: *l'alterité*).