Artificial Intelligence and the New Dynamics of Social Death: A Critical Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract: This article examines how artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies are reshaping social dynamics, leading to new forms of social death. The study analyzes how AI influences social relations, identity, and agency through a critical phenomenological approach, revealing the ethical and philosophical risks these technologies entail. It argues that social death is a crucial lens for understanding AI's impact on contemporary society, emphasizing the importance of human dignity and the need to rethink agency in an increasingly technologically mediated world.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, social death, critical phenomenology, ethics, agency, social exclusion.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies can potentially transform almost every aspect of our lives and existence (Amanov & Pradeep, 2023; Haleem et al., 2022). From the way we communicate and work to how we understand knowledge and identity, AI's influence is more than evident today. Among the most prominent of these technologies is ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI, which exemplifies the capabilities and challenges of the new hype with Large Language Models (LLM) and AI in shaping contemporary societies. Since its release, ChatGPT has become the reference system for a group of AI-related tools that have the potential to improve human productivity and innovation (Haleem et al., 2022), but it also raises important ethical, social, and philosophical questions (Floridi, 2015, 2023).

However, parallel to the rapid development of these technologies, we are also witnessing a time of great upheaval and transformation of moral, political, economic, and ideological norms. Scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) have observed that we are in a period of "liquid modernity," in which traditional structures and certainties are dissolving, giving rise to new forms of insecurity and inequality. For his part, Jean-Luc Nancy spoke on the "fragile skin" of the current world in which "now everything is falling apart: climate, species, finance, energy, confidence and even the ability to calculate of which we felt so assured, and which seems doomed to exceed itself of its own accord (2021, p. ix)."

From a different but compelling perspective, Alain Badiou (2008, p. 166) sketched the ideological battle of these times when he spoke on "the clash of civilizations, the conflict between democracies and terrorism, the fight to the death between human rights and the rights of religious fanaticism, the promotion of racial, historical, colonial or victimizing

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signifiers, such as 'Arab,' 'Jew,' 'Western,' 'Slav.'" All that, he added, "is nothing other than an ideological shadow play behind which the only real drama is taking place: the painful, dispersed, confused and slow replacement of the defunct communisms with another rational path towards the political emancipation of the large human masses currently consigned to chaos."

This period, the antinomies in which we live, or the chaos, is marked by a profound questioning of the values and principles that have long governed our social and political lives. However, while we cannot be absolutes in saying that technology has disrupted established norms, they certainly necessitate a reevaluation as it is already clear that they have been playing an essential role in those processes.

The concept of "crisis," particularly from a philosophical standpoint, is complex and multifaceted. It is often understood in everyday language as a period of paralysis, fear, and uncertainty—a temporary state that leaves individuals and societies in limbo. When I ask myself about the crisis, I do it forced by the circumstances, an abstract fabric of "events that happened to me," things that surround me and determine me economically and personally. From this first-person perspective, the crisis is almost like a paralysis. The common refrain "we are in crisis" carries a sense of despair, implying that a project has failed and a clear path has yet to be found. But overall, nothing can be done, simply to repeat that yet "we are in a crisis."

As we also know, the word originates from the ancient Greek term *κρίσις* (*krisis*), which means "decision" or "judgment." In its etymological roots, a crisis is not merely a moment of difficulty but a turning point—a situation that demands critical decisions that can lead to improvement or deterioration. The Greek verb *κρίνειν* (*krinein*), meaning "to separate" and "to decide," underscores that a crisis is inherently a moment of reflection and judgment in which the capacity for action and critical thinking should prevail. As Tangjia Wang points out, in ancient times, the word was used mainly as a medical term, and its meaning may have been "the turning point in the course of an illness," that is, the moment at which it will be decided "whether the patient lives or dies (2014, p. 256)." But more importantly, as he further demonstrates, the "crisis not only causes worry and fear but also anticipation and hope (2014, p. 266)."

This conceptualization of crisis as a moment of critical decision-making is essential to understanding the contemporary world. We have taken special care of it here because, to understand AI, we must not start from superficial positions, that is to say, neither from an extremely naive stance nor from an absolute overvaluation of what these new technologies can bring us. Then, it is precisely to understand how these new technologies impact our lives in times of crisis that we have brought up the concept of social death.

In our digitally mediated world, social death increasingly manifests itself as a condition in which individuals or groups are excluded from social (Králová, 2015) and political (Harff & Gurr, 1988) participation to the point of becoming invisible or non-existent in society's eyes. Scholars like Orlando Patterson (1985) and Jana Králová (2015) have explored how power dynamics and social structures can render certain groups socially dead. A process that, in the context of AI, may have escalated and reconfigured in new and troubling ways.

AI systems like Thanabots can digitally recreate deceased individuals, blurring the boundaries between life and death (Rodríguez Reséndiz & Rodríguez Reséndiz, 2024). This "digital resurrection" raises ethical concerns about authenticity and emotional impact. Moreover, AI's role in mediating human-human and human-nature relations could undermine the human self-image and emotional reciprocity, creating what Ban Wang (2022) defines as

"death in life." These, among many others, are just examples of the necessity to go deeper into the socio-ethical reflection on AI's impact. Nevertheless, what is really at stake is around the notions Stocchetti (2023) explains. As he stated, delegating human textual functions to AI risks suppressing fundamental aspects of the human condition:

> "The impossibility of mistakes, confusion, incoherencies, and contradictions that populates human experience of life will efface also the desire to learn and communicate this experience. The establishment of a computationally perfect present will eradicate the capacity to desire alternative futures. In this world, imagination becomes useless and rebellion impossible (2023, p. 80)."

Thus, setting AI within the conceptual framework of social death raises questions of vital importance for philosophical inquiry. The decisions we make today will determine not only the future trajectory of technology but also the shape of our social world and the possibilities for human flourishing. Alternatively, put another way, the decisions we make today also involve the future place of human agency and its central predicament, human dignity.

Given the profound transformations brought about by the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies, it becomes imperative to critically examine the underlying social dynamics that these technologies are reshaping. This article argues that the concept of social death provides a crucial lens for understanding the current AI landscape. By exploring how AI influences social relations, identity, and agency, we can gain deeper insights into how these technologies reflect and actively construct new forms of participation in reality. Thus, we will aim to demonstrate that social death is central to understanding AI's ethical and philosophical challenges.

While much has been written about AI, this study focuses on the social and existential aspects. By adopting a critical phenomenological approach, the paper aims to analyze how AI contributes to the erosion of traditional social bonds and the emergence of new hierarchies of power and control. To achieve our objective, we will first define social death, exploring how it has been traditionally understood in sociological and philosophical literature. Then, in the second section, building on the fundamental understanding of social death, we will deepen the mechanisms by which AI contributes to social exclusion. Besides, the section will explore the broader political implications of AI as a technology of power. The analysis will focus on how AI-driven decision-making processes impact the construction and deconstruction of identities and how these processes perpetuate social death.

We will use critical phenomenology as an extension of classical phenomenology that incorporates a critical examination of the social, political, and material conditions that shape human experience. Whereas the traditional view, rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl and developed by figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, focuses on describing the essential structures of lived experience as temporality, perception, and intersubjectivity-critical phenomenology goes further by interrogating the power relations assumed in these experiences. Our experiences are not isolated but deeply interconnected with the places, times, and cultural environments in which they are produced. They are determined by "horizons of meaning," including temporal, spatial, social, historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts (Weiss et al., 2019). In this sense, critical phenomenology is both a philosophical practice and political activism that seeks to restructure the world to create liberating possibilities. It does not merely interpret but actively participates in the transformation of oppressive social structures. This active engagement enables us to be part of the change, making the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology to interpret the world and change it.

2. Social Death: A Philosophical and Sociological Analysis of the Disintegration of Social Being

2.1. Philosophical Foundations of Social Death

In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (2020), we find an analysis close to the contemporary view of social death. The description made by Friedrich Engels in that text clearly shows characteristics of a type of death that had been described on very few occasions. In his research, explaining the situation of the Manchester workers, he points out that people experiencing poverty are thrown into a type of murder:

> "He [the worker] knows that he has something today, and that it does not depend upon himself whether he shall have something tomorrow. He knows that every breeze that blows, every whim of his employer, every bad turn of trade may hurl him back into the fierce whirlpool from which he has temporarily saved himself, and in which it is hard and often impossible to keep his head above water. He knows that, though he may have the means of living today, it is very uncertain whether he shall tomorrow" (p.26).

Engels draws a parallel between individual acts of murder and the broader societal conditions that inevitably result in the death of thousands. He argues that when society places workers in situations where they are deprived of basic needs, subjected to environments that deteriorate their health, and forced by law to remain in such conditions until death comes, it is committing murder just as any individual who knowingly causes a fatal injury. He further describes this as a "disguised, malicious murder"—a form of violence that is insidious and unavoidable, where the perpetrators remain unseen and the deaths appear natural. Yet, he insists, "murder it remains," as society is fully aware of the deadly consequences of these conditions and does nothing to prevent them (2020, p. 96).

The echoes of these ideas resonate in the young Karl Marx of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (2010). Here, Marx discusses the notion of alienation, expressing how wage labor alienates the workers from their product, the act of production, themselves, and other workers. The loss of identity is reduced to the context of the worker; however, Marx's definition is closely related to the definition of a type of social isolation and disconnection that we will see in more contemporary thinkers. Indeed, the worker seems dead because their relational essence is lost due to the expropriation to which they are subjected.

Marx and Engels are perhaps two well-known references in developing the concept. Nevertheless, while social death has been more precisely defined in a contemporary medical context, its roots can also be traced through critical phenomenology. This philosophical approach, which builds on Husserl's methodology, incorporates perspectives from thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault. Critical phenomenology examines lived experiences within broader social, historical, and political contexts. It highlights how the subject's inaction, isolation, or even "death" is provoked by the political and social structures that sustain them. As Zurn (2019) notes, critical phenomenology analyzes "the roots of social death in the rupture of intersubjective capacities" (p. 309).

A crucial example of applying critical phenomenology to social death is Lisa Guenther's *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (2013). From a methodological standpoint, Guenther interprets Husserl's phenomenological reduction as a method to demonstrate an irreducible distinction between consciousness and the world. Consciousness is not "a small extension of the world" (Husserl, 1991, p. 24) nor a substantive thing that can

be studied as an object. Likewise, Guenther reminds us that the German philosopher emphasizes an essential correlation between consciousness and the world, making it impossible to speak of the mind as if it were separable from that of which it is conscious. Therefore, the phenomenological reduction reveals consciousness as the most fundamental condition for the possibility of experience. The personal self is essentially constituted in relation to a world and other selves. For this reason, the individual is not self-sufficient but "dependent on others, not only on individual persons but on communities of persons, social institutions, morality, law, the church, etc. A man is what he is as a being who sustains himself in his interaction with the things of his material world and with the people of his personal world, and who, in doing so, maintains his individuality" (Husserl, 2002, p. 148).

One of the most original aspects of Guenther's research is using these ideas to focus on a specific social problem. This contributes to solidifying a novel field of reflection that still has much to offer. Following Guenther, the body is "a hinge" between the self and the other, but also a hinge situated "in an objective world, which the full human person shares with others" (2013, p. 31). Her study is further grounded with critical analyses from Frantz Fanon, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas to examine how isolation deprives prisoners of the bodily presence of others, forcing them to rely on the isolated resources of their subjectivity, with the effect of eroding or undermining that subjectivity:

> "Social death is the effect of a (social) practice in which a person or group of people is excluded, dominated, or humiliated to the point of becoming dead to the rest of society. Although such people are physically alive, their lives no longer bear a social meaning; they no longer count as lives that matter. The socially dead may speak, act, compose symphonies, or find a cure for cancer, but their words and deeds remain of no account" (p. xx).

2.2. Social Death in Sociological and Anthropological Contexts

Apparently, the first proper mention of social death was in the medical context. David Sudnow (1967) introduced it in his study on processes related to death. He defined it as the treatment of a patient as if they were already a corpse, despite their physiological functioning, based on the doctor's perception of the patient's social viability. Although Sudnow's idea is analytically rigorous, it is primarily confined to the medical field, describing the point at which a patient is treated as a corpse while still clinically alive (p. 74). Around the same time, Glaser and Strauss (1966) explored the distinction between physical and social death, influenced by Goffman's (1961) notion of the *mortification of the self*. Goffman, for example, described how *total institutions*, like hospitals and prisons, strip individuals of their identities, a process that can be seen as a form of social death.

Nevertheless, it is not until Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1985) that we will find a distinct and key contribution in this field. In his book, Patterson argues that slavery results in a sort of social death by stripping slaves of all rights and social connections, effectively treating them as objects without agency. Here, he will introduce the term *liminal incorporation*, borrowed from anthropology, to describe the slaves' existence in an intermediate space—visible but not recognized as legitimate social participants (Turner, 1967; van Gennep, 1977).

At the beginning of his exploration, Patterson states, "All human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons" (p. 1). However, slavery was an extreme form of domination, nearing total power for the master and total powerlessness for the enslaved person. By examining slavery's dynamics and institutional processes, Patterson

highlights social death as a crucial concept for understanding how society perceives the loss of relationships (p.38). Then, he identifies two forms of social death:

1. **Intrusive:** It occurs when an enemy is captured and enslaved, introduced as an alien, an external Other who does not integrate into the community due to the violent nature of their subjugation.
2. **Extrusive:** It involves individuals who, once part of a society, commit acts that ostracize them, forcing them into slavery and outside the community.

Considering the previous categorization, it is not a matter of two distinct forms of social death. In reality, the process is more complex, with both intrusive and extrusive types representing a twofold manifestation of the same phenomenon. This means that, within the same context, social exclusion and isolation can occur due to either external or internal factors. As Patterson aptly puts it, "One fell because he was an enemy; the other became an enemy because he had fallen" (p. 40). The point here is to understand that in both instances, existence is expelled and forced to reside right at the limit because although in both cases, we are talking about subjects who do not enjoy all their rights, they are not biologically dead. That is why their existence is liminal.

> "… the liminality of the slave is not just a powerful agent of authority for the master, but an important route to the usefulness of the slave for both his master and the community at large. The essence of caste relations and notions of ritual pollution is that they demarcate impassable boundaries. The essence of slavery is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular. Already dead, he lives outside the mana of the gods and can cross the boundaries with social and supernatural impunity" (p. 51).

A pivotal moment in the definition of this concept is the study by Jana Králová *What is Social Death?* (2015). The author will argue that social death reflects the increasing implementation of control mechanisms that diminish an individual's social influence. Indeed, the notion points to a "degradation and eventual cessation of the capacity to function as a social being." To illustrate this phenomenon, Králová provides examples from her extensive literature review. She cites solitary confinement, refugees forced to leave their homeland, and individuals with incurable infectious diseases treated as social outcasts. These examples highlight how the studied notion can manifest in various circumstances. Moreover, her study significantly contributes to the field by offering a conceptual framework to organize and understand these experiences. In that regard, she defines social death by identifying three key losses:

1. The loss of social identity
2. The loss of social connectedness
3. The disintegration of the body

Nevertheless, she will also argue that the concept of social death should be reserved for extreme circumstances where most or all facets of the individual's life are severely compromised. To this end, she adds that social death is best defined against another concept, "well-being," which she suggests is its antithesis.

2.3. What is Social Death?

After reviewing some important moments in the historical, logical development of the concept of social death, we must finally give our definition. Despite Králová's precise identification of the three losses, there is a gap in understanding the unifying principle behind them. Her analysis remains somewhat external, linking authors superficially without digging

into the logical or historical processes connecting those notions. Then, uncovering the internal logic governing them is more crucial than identifying the external elements of these losses. In other words, Králová's triad reflects an alienated presentation of the world to the self, where culture, Others, and even one's body are not adequately experienced. That is why we can say that the loss of the surrounding world, fundamental to the self's constitution, is also closely tied to the self's core.

If anyone can articulate how this conflict-ridden reality is presented to the subject, it is Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is well-known for his philosophy of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. However, within that same extensive analysis, he also analyses the nature of our relationship with the Other. Surprisingly, what he describes in those pages is an exact depiction of today's crises and a vivid portrayal of how social death is experienced from a first-person perspective. For the French thinker, not only do we experience shame in what we are—"I am ashamed of what I am" (1984, p. 302)—but also, "I can never encounter anything but the consciousness that is mine" (p. 303). Moreover, Sartre argues that our gaze and even our bodies serve as mediations with ourselves, constructed in opposition to others.

We contend that Sartre's description precisely mirrors many aspects of today's situation. Ironically, his account aligns with what we now refer to as social death. The freedom of the subject, rather than fostering genuine social connection, contributes to a social relation in which the Other is always perceived as the enemy, as Sartre posits. Then, contrary to the external manifestations described until now, the underlying issue proposed in this article is not merely about the disconnection -in abstract- but also about the progressive loss of the agency of the self. Agency is the capacity to act in each environment, make decisions, and execute actions. Thus, the key to social death is the self's loss of agency because it renders individuals akin to automatons or zombies stripped of human essence and the ability to relate to their surroundings. In philosophical terms (Schlosser, 2019), agency is the capacity of a being to act intentionally. It involves the exercise or manifestation of this capacity through actions typically explained by the agent's mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and intentions.

Nevertheless, if we think about that from a critical phenomenology point of view, the subject of action, blocked by circumstances of social oppression, mutilation, torture, economic deprivation, or a similar situation, is a subject deprived of its ability to act and project itself into the world. This lack of projection results in an impossibility: the apparent subject without action, a subject without agency, or at least a subject whose capacity to relate to the world has been eroded. We believe that this, at its core, is a contradiction as there can be no subject without agency, at least not in an absolute sense. This estrangement is not a radical rupture but a relationship that is sufficiently alien for the subject to pretend or feel different from themselves. This experience is, for example, that of the migrant, who feels like a radically different being while aware of their new reality and relationship with the new culture and the new language they must learn simultaneously. It is the experience of those who have been politically silenced, repressed, and tortured. Here, in a more radical way, the political system imposes itself on the flesh, the organs, the bones, the very things with which we relate to the world. However, the world does not disappear completely; instead, it appears in another way. For this zombie-like subject, the world appears through pain, absence, lack, and guilt... just as for the migrant, it appears under the mantle of despair, estrangement, and shame.

In conclusion, social death is a multifaceted and complex concept that has evolved through various theoretical perspectives and academic disciplines. From early philosophical approaches, through phenomenology and Orlando Patterson's studies on slavery, to contemporary analyses by Králová, a deeper understanding of this phenomenon has been

constructed. While the concept encompasses numerous debates and thinkers, this section has focused on those considered most significant. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated that social death can be defined as a process of degradation and the eventual cessation of an individual's ability to function as an entirely social being. This process is characterized by the loss of social identity, the breakdown of social connections, and the disintegration of bodily integrity. However, beyond these external manifestations, social death involves profound alienation of the individual from their environment and themselves. Therefore, its external features stem from the lack of agency it points to, an agency that appears inauthentically regardless of its ontological grounding. At the same time, it is crucial to understand that social death is not a binary state but a continuum that can manifest in varying degrees and forms, from social marginalization to extreme cases like solitary confinement or, in its severest form, genocide. Underlying all these processes is the erosion or loss of individual agency. When an individual is stripped of their ability to influence their environment, make autonomous decisions, and actively participate in constructing their social reality, they are in a state of social death, even if biologically alive.

Summarizing what has been said so far, we have explored the concept of social death through various philosophical, sociological, and anthropological lenses. Thinkers such as Patterson, Králová, and Guenther are among the main authors who have addressed it. Although social death has a concrete manifestation in various forms of exclusion and disconnection, at its core lies a more significant problem of human agency. The analysis concludes that social death is not a binary state but a continuum that can manifest itself in varying degrees, deeply intertwined with the erosion of individual agency and the capacity to act within one's environment.

3. AI and the Reconfiguration of Social Structures: Ethical and Social Implications

3.1. Ethical Dilemmas of AI: From Anthropomorphization to Present-Realism

AI is not just an efficiency tool but a powerful technology that can shape governance, security, social services, and many other areas. Although its use had already spread to many domains before 2020, it was the launch of GPT-3 that year when many of the old ethical debates resurfaced, and even more after 2022 with its 3.5 release.

Thus, in the current discussion on the social impact of AI, one finds, broadly speaking, two main perspectives. Although disguised today with fresh features, these can also be seen as a revival of the questions raised by John R. Searle in his article *Minds, Brains, and Programs*. Therein, the author distinguishes between two concepts: *strong AI* and *weak AI*:

> "According to weak AI, the principal value of the computer in the study of the mind is that it gives us a very powerful tool… But according to strong AI, the computer is not merely a tool in the study of the mind; rather, the appropriately programmed computer really is a mind, in the sense that computers given the right programs can be literally said to understand and have other cognitive states" (Searle, 1980, p. 417).

One proponent of strong AI is Professor Yuval Noah Harari. For Harari (2023), the idea of ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) endangers humanity's future and undermines foundational cultural artifacts—laws, institutions, and artistic expressions—that are deeply intertwined with language. Furthermore, it will affect politics, "hacking" the very foundations of our societies.

Moreover, it is well known that Professor Harari is not the only one who has this interpretation. Along with him, other researchers assume strong views on AI, adding that it will inevitably develop into a sort of Terminator-like machine. Let us call this idea the

Terminator hypothesis (TH), i.e., a distinctly dystopian view that posits AI will inevitably evolve into at least an autonomous entity, potentially posing a considerable danger to humanity. This hypothesis gives rise to more apocalyptic and pessimistic views, but at its core, the TH suggests that AI will eventually have the capability to be autonomous and sentient.

This hypothesis is supported by several prominent researchers and theorists who warn that advanced AI, if not properly controlled, could represent an existential threat to humanity. Ben Goertzel (2015), in his article *Superintelligence: Fears, Promises, and Potentials*, discusses the views of researchers like Nick Bostrom and Eliezer Yudkowsky. These authors believe that intelligent systems could act as "reward-maximizers," pursuing goals that could be dangerous if not properly managed. Although Goertzel acknowledges that these arguments have a logical basis, he suggests they are often presented exaggeratedly. Furthermore, he rightly argues that viewing intelligence as an "open-ended" process rather than goal-oriented could reduce the perceived dangers of AI.

Kumar and Choudhury (2023) explore Stephen Hawking's warnings, arguing that human adaptability, resilience, and self-awareness will allow us to survive potential threats. However, they warn that over-reliance on AI could negatively affect our intelligence. They suggest we must also consider the dangers humans might pose to AI. Within this group, we find the interesting perspective of Kate Crawford (2016) in her article *Artificial Intelligence's White Guy Problem*, where she critiques the focus on AI as an existential threat to humanity, arguing that this focus distracts from the real issues of bias and discrimination being integrated into these systems. Crawford suggests that instead of focusing on apocalyptic scenarios, more attention should be paid to the social inequalities that AI perpetuates and amplifies (Crawford, 2016).

Then, the questions at the bottom of these discussions are: To what extent will AI become General AI, or, in Searle's words, can machines think? Furthermore, if so, how will we tackle the ethical issues that this outcome represents? These questions exceed the purpose of this paper. However, there are significant consequences to this philosophical debate.

By arguing against AI, many thinkers want to expose the need for an ethical framework to somehow control its development. That is a laudable and responsible objective, but in addition to what is mentioned in the previous paragraph, these arguments often fall into the trap of negativity bias (Chiarella et al., 2022) by exclusively focusing on dystopian outcomes. The fact that this argument is based on the idea that *we will have Terminator-like machines in the future* seems fallacious. Instead of guiding us effectively, this presupposition does the opposite by focusing our attention on the fantasy that someday a machine will "think" or "feel" in a particular way. Instead, we must recognize that our understanding of the future is inherently uncertain, and therefore, we should consider a broader spectrum of possible scenarios—both positive and negative.

Therefore, instead of going in that direction, we advocate an ethic based on AI and its actual characteristics, setting aside illusions or, at least, evaluating them as just that: the production of our imagination. Let us call this position *present-realism in AI ethics*. By adopting this stance, we emphasize the importance of a contextual and comprehensive analysis of AI's current development and rapid growth. We also highlight the role of human beings in creating, perceiving, consuming, and using these machines. In this way, the ethical and moral debate surrounding AI should focus more on the human hand that wields the tool rather than the tool itself. Our argument is not against the necessity of an ethics of responsibility linked to AI development but against making that ethical path dependent solely on speculative future features.

The arguments that anthropomorphize AI are in a similar position. As the term suggests, anthropomorphization involves attributing human-like traits to non-human entities. While this

process can enhance user trust and interaction in various contexts, it also introduces risks and ethical concerns (Deshpande et al., 2023). Anthropomorphization can lead to the exaggeration of AI capabilities and distort moral judgments, potentially affecting perceptions of responsibility and trust (Placani, 2024).

In conclusion, we have reviewed the stance of those who oppose AI, arguing about the potential negative aspects it could bring in the future. Although this stance, along with those who anthropomorphize these tools, is not without basis, it tends to overlook what we have considered a more objective and contextualized perspective of this phenomenon, which we have termed *present-realism*. This perspective opens the door to numerous future studies. Still, we have addressed it here because we believe it is an essential step in shifting the gaze away from focusing *only* on the negative aspects of AI technology to examine the social factors that underlie it. To understand how social death operates in the context of AI, we must first recognize that the discriminations, limitations, alienations, and other processes linked to that notion are not the product of an abstract AI but instead of the human activity underlying these tools and that is shaped in specific situations. The other position serves only to mask how AI really works.

3.2. AI as a Tool of Social Exclusion and Control: The New Face of Social Death

If we have discussed the processes of anthropomorphization and what we term *present-realism*, it is because we believe that before analyzing how social death manifests in the context of artificial intelligence, we must first understand the ideas that obscure our perception of it. Our intention is not to suggest that a new era of flawless technological development awaits us nor to condemn technology itself. On the contrary, critical analysis is valuable here because it helps us recognize that our object of study only gains meaning through human interactions, specifically through those that are historically and politically situated.

The crisis we referred to at the beginning of this article is not fundamentally about the tools we use to transform or change the world but about the human activities that shape and are shaped by these tools. In essence, questions about technology are inherently questions about ourselves. With this understanding, we can now view AI through a different lens, recognizing that its use is not merely about conquering humanity's future but about shaping a world that operates under specific laws that alienate the subject.

Unlike traditional forms of social death, which are often visible and easily identifiable, AI-driven ones are more subtle and concealed beneath layers of misconceptions. One of the most striking aspects of this phenomenon is AI's role as a mediator between humans and reality. Beneath the surface of a chatbot that mimics human responses lies a high computational capacity devoid of experience or life. This absence of concrete first-person experience results in responses that merely reflect two things: the user's input (in the form of a prompt, for example) and the vast amount of data, all of which, in one way or another, originate from humans who own the machines.

Specifically on data, we are interested in highlighting that there is a natural perception of how our interaction with AI occurs. For many, a fact is simply that which is perceived, the elements that make up *my* knowledge of reality. From this point of view, reality occurs externally and independently of *my* consciousness. Moreover, data is usually understood as numbers and information that may reflect objective facts. With the advent of big data, this view has only further reinforced the idea that data are ultimately the building blocks on which we construct all our reality—a fast, technological, and complex world (Liu, 2014).

However, as stated by Hong Liu, data results from human cognitive activity, an activity characterized by the subjective reflection of objective things:

> "Data is not only the quantitative representation of things but also the gist for understanding things…Data origins from the observation and measurements, demonstrating the intrinsic features of things, whose objectivity is still under the influence of human subjective factors, and this property is accompanied with data even from the birth of number. Data is, as it were, a bond to connect the objectivity of things and the subjectivity of human things, and also is a bridge for human beings to acknowledge the world" (2014, p. 65).

Then, during the initial phase of enchantment with AI, the focus tends to be on the bot's apparent perfection and its potential to enhance and expand human capabilities. However, it remains a faceless language, a voiceless discourse, and a lifeless machine. This lack of authentic vitality might not have been particularly noteworthy if not for the overwhelming flood of news and novelty surrounding the hype of chatbots. Stocchetti (2023) has raised similar questions regarding chatbots and their textual reproductive capabilities. While human writing can be a matter of life and death, he thinks, AI produces text autonomously—without the interest, ability, or moral responsibility to consider the purpose and effects of its output. This absence of moral responsibility, a cornerstone of democratic communication, fundamentally distinguishes AI-generated text from human writing.

> "The problem is not if AI can write a symphony – it probably can – but the actual meaning of that piece of music beyond its commercial usage. Outside the logic of the culture industry, the main function of AI consists of the meaningless production of meaning" (2023, p. 79).

This absence of meaning, then, must be compensated, and it is indeed compensated by the desire for infinite perfection allegedly inherent in every machine. The pursuit of perfection is not a novel aspect of this era, but what is new is the increasing fascination with novelty and the constant stream of new events and facts. This obsession overwhelms everything, leaving behind the pace and patience of everyday life. Ultimately, this lack of imperfection and primitive desire to constantly succeed compromise our very notion of agency:

> "The impossibility of mistakes, confusion, incoherencies, and contradictions that populates human experience of life will efface also the desire to learn and communicate this experience. The establishment of a computationally perfect present will eradicate the capacity to desire alternative futures. In this world, imagination becomes useless and rebellion impossible" (Stocchetti, 2023, p. 80).

There is, however, another moment of disillusionment when the human perfection invested in the machine returns as a social experience of alienation. In what sense do we speak of deprivation and social alienation? In its most primitive form, it is the marginalization of human functions. As AI systems gain greater capacity, there is a risk that human functions will be diminished or rendered obsolete. This is perhaps one of the most documented aspects of AI in recent years, namely how it can progressively affect our daily lives by replacing humans. Automation and AI-driven technologies can replace jobs traditionally held by humans, leading to feelings of insignificance and social exclusion among those affected (Tyson & Zysman, 2022) (Gibbs, 2017). This impact is especially pronounced in sectors where human labor is undervalued or workers lack the skills to transition into new roles created by AI advancements.

For example, Brett Adcock, CEO of Figure AI—a company involved in constructing robots integrated with OpenAI's services—claimed in a recent interview (Peter H. Diamandis, 2024) that by 2040, there will be 10 billion robots worldwide, radically transforming the labor market. This vision suggests a future where robots will perform dangerous and monotonous tasks, but it also raises concerns about the displacement of human jobs and the ethical implications of widespread robotic integration into society. Many companies are already laying off personnel to increase investment in artificial intelligence, yet this is happening without a clear understanding of the future impact on the labor market or how current roles and positions will be transformed.

AI technologies can erode meaningful human connections, particularly in communication and social interaction. For instance, the rise of AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants reduces the need for human customer service representatives (Adam et al., 2021), potentially leading to social isolation for displaced workers and consumers who prefer human interaction (Sheehan et al., 2020). This shift fosters a sense of alienation, contributing to social death as people feel increasingly disconnected from their communities. While interacting with these human-like machines offers the opportunity to expand knowledge and culture, it comes at a significant cost. We are engaging with entities that are built to mimic humanity but lack the essence of being human—no face, no soul. The absence of face-to-face interaction underscores a growing distance between the subject and its world. It highlights the paradox of unfulfilled *ontological expansiveness* (Sullivan as cited in Weiss et al., 2019), where the potential for connection is vast yet ultimately empty.

Additionally, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube increasingly rely on AI for content moderation and community guideline enforcement. Although these systems are designed to maintain safe and inclusive online spaces, they can also lead to unjustly excluding certain voices (Gorwa et al., 2020). Also, it has been noted that new chatbots may not adequately represent minority sectors or cultures of the Global South (Artopolous, 2024). Much of the data used to train these models is drawn from sites and platforms primarily aimed at English-speaking and Global North audiences. Additionally, economic and political barriers in other regions often hinder the free creation of content that could be used for chatbot training. This underscores the idea that far from being neutral tools that objectively reflect the world, chatbots and AI technologies, in general, are deeply embedded in dominant political and economic systems (Arun, 2019).

Sufficient elements suggest that new technologies could influence social death tendencies and that political systems play a role in this matter. As Patterson states in his definition (1985), it is not only about how the socially dead subject has been captured or converted into a corpse but also how these categories serve the purpose of the political and legal system that dominates the community. In this regard, governance increasingly relies on AI-driven systems to manage and make decisions about large populations. These systems are often implemented with the promise of efficiency and objectivity, offering the potential to streamline bureaucratic processes and reduce human error (Zuiderwijk et al., 2021). However, this efficiency comes at a cost, particularly in social justice and individual rights. When governance is delegated to AI, decision-making processes that once involved human judgment and discretion are now driven by algorithms that may lack transparency, accountability, and sensitivity to context.

In security, AI has become a central tool for surveillance, risk assessment, and law enforcement. Governments worldwide increasingly deploy AI technologies to monitor and control populations, often for public safety. However, using AI in security raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the erosion of individual autonomy and privacy (Feldstein, 2019). One of the most prominent examples of AI in security is facial recognition technology, which law enforcement agencies use to identify and track individuals in public

spaces. While proponents argue that facial recognition can help prevent crime and enhance security, critics point out that it disproportionately targets marginalized communities and infringes on civil liberties.

Furthermore, the pervasive use of AI in surveillance contributes to a culture of constant monitoring and control, in which individuals are always aware that they are being watched. This process erodes personal autonomy, as individuals can alter their behavior to avoid scrutiny or punishment. The result is a society where individuals are reduced to data points, continually tracked and evaluated by AI systems that make decisions about their lives without their input or consent.

Therefore, examining how AI-driven systems contribute to social death, the discussion has highlighted how these technologies exacerbate existing inequalities and create new forms of marginalization. However, building on what has been discussed in previous sections, we must underscore the political ramifications of AI as a power tool, revealing the need for greater scrutiny and accountability in deploying AI technologies in governance and security.

This subsection has explored the social implications of AI, particularly its role in reinforcing social exclusion and control. Several examples have been presented of how these new processes increase the loss of social identity, the erosion of social connectedness, and the fragmentation of the body. In addition, the idea has been introduced that, with the advent of AI in a context defined by social death, the greatest effect is on the subject's agency. A subject who perceives the AI world as perfect but, in reality, sees his or her sense of alienation strengthened.

4. Conclusions

We have started from the premise that the appreciation of the phenomenon is not merely an external fact but is closely linked to the subject. From this perspective, we have pointed out that, in addition to the cognitive elements involved in this process, there are also political and ideological components. The subject has a history, seeks meaning, relates to things, the world, and nature, loves, and finds friendship and hatred. This presupposition, sometimes forgotten or at other times overvalued, deserves consideration when discussing the current crisis, as it essentially concerns the subject and their agency.

In this context, the study critically examined how AI, as a technology of power, impacts various areas of our daily lives. Therefore, the ramifications of these AI-driven or AI-mediated processes were highlighted, revealing how these systems can accentuate social death by stripping individuals of their agency and reducing them to mere data points.

Now we can affirm that social death fosters a specific type of relationship with AI, but there are also aspects where potential benefits can be discussed. For this reason, it is necessary to expand social studies on AI by combining knowledge from sociology, political science, and ethics. These approaches would offer a more holistic understanding of the phenomena mentioned.

Thus, our objective, as suggested above, has not been merely to highlight the emergence of new ideas or to reiterate processes that have been present for a long time, such as marginalization, alienation, and social exclusion. Instead, we must also emphasize the possibility of rethinking the subject's position within the technological shift we are currently experiencing.

In this context, a more contemporary approach must consider a realistic and present perspective, overcoming AI's futuristic, mythological, and illusory visions. Such visions may have value as literature or hypotheses, but they are limited in their scientific and philosophical relevance. Moreover, these perspectives, which often anthropomorphize AI,

minimize the crucial point that technology must always be considered in relation to the subject who consumes, uses, and ultimately transforms it. We can talk about an extended humanity, but the essential point is not just the object and its functioning but also what it means for the subject who uses it. The key to this interpretation lies in how we emphasize the role of the tool: Are AI tools simply products of our work and necessity, or are they autonomous and sentient beings? To this day, they remain expressions, relations, and extensions of the humans who use them. Only in this way could we speak of a philosophy of AI.

Now, more than ever, there is an urgent need to increase education on technology, AI, chatbots, and, perhaps more importantly, critical thinking. The latter, must underpin any future ambition with AI, whether through a broader philosophy that addresses these challenges or the development of new philosophical tools to understand how to use and manipulate the engineering principles that govern AI properly.

In this way, still orbiting around human beings and their concrete and objective reality, we find lights and shadows that help us understand our creations. If the crisis is also pressing from a technological standpoint, we must then satisfy our instinct for search and the need for change by fully embracing another Copernican revolution.

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