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THE BIG QUESTION

The algorithm and the almighty: rethinking omniscience, suffering, and salvation

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Abstract

This article examines the philosophical and theological implications of artificial intelligence (AI) and the technological singularity for core religious concepts. The predictive capacities of AI challenge traditional accounts of divine omniscience, raising critical questions about the distinction between algorithmic foreknowledge and theological models of perfect knowledge. The increasing determinacy of human behaviour through data-driven systems complicates classical formulations of human freedom and moral responsibility. Additionally, the potential for artificial suffering demands an expansion of theodicy and a reassessment of the creator-creature relationship in light of human technological agency. Finally, emerging technological eschatologies, promising digital immortality and transcendence, confront religious soteriology with novel anthropocentric models of salvation.

This study argues that the philosophy of religion must critically rearticulate its categories of knowledge, suffering, and eschatological hope to remain conceptually viable in a world mediated by intelligent systems.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; omniscience; technological singularity; soteriology; technological transcendence

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and the possibility of a technological singularity – where AI surpasses human intelligence and fundamentally reshapes society – pose profound challenges for the philosophy of religion. While traditional discussions in religious thought have focused on issues such as the nature of God, the existence of the soul, or the problem of evil, AI introduces new dimensions to these questions. Beyond asking whether AI can develop consciousness or possess a soul, we must engage with deeper issues concerning prediction, responsibility, and salvation. These challenges demand that religious philosophy rethinks core concepts and explores whether these ideas remain relevant in a world increasingly shaped by intelligent systems.

One of the most significant challenges AI presents lies in its ability to predict human behaviour. In many religious traditions, God's omniscience is understood as perfect knowledge of all events, including human choices. This knowledge is traditionally seen as different from human or scientific knowledge in that it is both non-causal and comprehensive. However, AI complicates this distinction by offering predictive models that, while probabilistic, are increasingly accurate. If AI can anticipate human behaviour with a high degree of precision, it raises the question: What distinguishes divine omniscience from algorithmic foreknowledge? This forces religious philosophers to reconsider the uniqueness of God's

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knowledge and perhaps shift focus from factual prediction to other dimensions, such as moral understanding or relational engagement.

Moreover, AI blurs the line between foreknowledge and determinism. Theology has long sought to reconcile divine omniscience with human freedom by insisting that knowing an outcome does not cause it. Alvin Plantinga maintains that God's foreknowledge is compatible with genuine human freedom (Plantinga 1977). However, as predictive technologies expose the extent to which human behaviour follows patterns that machines can anticipate, the idea of radical freedom seems increasingly strained. The predictive capacity of AI introduces new tensions between technological determinism and theological accounts of free will, demanding a reexamination of what it means to act freely within a world that seems increasingly determined by data and algorithms.

The issue of suffering also takes on new complexity with the possibility of artificial suffering. The problem of evil has been a central concern in the philosophy of religion, asking why a benevolent, omnipotent God allows suffering to exist. Leibniz argued that our world, even with all of the suffering, is the best possible world because suffering serves a greater good (Leibniz 1988). Traditionally, this debate has focused on human and animal suffering, but the possibility of artificial suffering demands a new perspective. If AI systems were to develop consciousness or simulate suffering, it is unclear whether this suffering would fit within a theological framework like Leibniz's. Even if the experience of machine suffering is not identical to human suffering, it could still carry moral weight, forcing us to expand the scope of theodicy to include new categories of harm.

The development of AI also raises deeper questions about human responsibility. John Hick's soul-making theodicy suggests that suffering exists to develop moral character (Hick 2010). But if humans create intelligent systems capable of suffering, do we inherit divine-like responsibility for the existence of this new evil? Creating beings that can experience harm introduces moral burdens similar to those traditionally attributed to God. Hans Jonas warns that with great technological power comes moral responsibility (Jonas 2000). Much like divine creation involves responsibility for the risk of evil, technological creation imposes obligations on humans as co-creators. This complicates the relationship between human and divine agency, suggesting that creating artificial life may involve sharing in both the power and the moral responsibility of creation.

Beyond questions of knowledge and suffering, AI and the singularity challenge religious eschatology – the study of ultimate ends and salvation. Singularitarian thinkers, such as Ray Kurzweil, envision a future where humans transcend biological limitations through technology, achieving immortality and potentially digital consciousness (Kurzweil 2005). These visions closely resemble religious promises of eternal life but replace a divine explanation of salvation with human ingenuity. This raises the question: Can technology fulfil the human longing for transcendence, or does true salvation require divine intervention? If immortality can be achieved through science, religious promises of salvation may lose their distinctiveness.

Religious traditions must grapple with the possibility that salvation may no longer be an exclusively spiritual or divine achievement. Some theologians might interpret the singularity as part of divine providence, viewing technological progress as a tool for fulfilling God's purposes. On the other hand, some theologians may see the pursuit of technological immortality as hubristic, an overreach that seeks to replace divine agency with human control. This raises difficult questions about the nature of eschatological hope: Is salvation always a spiritual process, or could it be achieved technologically? As AI and the singularity challenge traditional religious narratives, faith communities must decide whether these developments represent a threat or an opportunity to rethink their doctrines.

Ultimately, AI and the singularity blur many distinctions that have long structured religious thought: the boundary between creator and creation, the difference between

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foreknowledge and prediction, and the divide between divine and human agency. These developments invite religious philosophers to reconsider core concepts in light of new technological realities. It is no longer enough to ask whether AI can have a soul; we must ask whether our frameworks of knowledge, morality, and hope are adequate for understanding a world shaped by intelligent systems.

Rather than resisting these changes, the philosophy of religion must engage with them. Traditional categories may need to be reinterpreted, expanded, or even replaced if they are to remain meaningful in this new context. Whether we embrace AI as part of divine providence or reject it as a threat to religious truth, we must confront the new questions it raises about knowledge, responsibility, and transcendence. In doing so, religious philosophy will need to explore new ways of understanding what it means to act freely, to suffer meaningfully, and to hope for the future – whether that hope lies in divine grace, technological progress, or some combination of both.

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