

AI and the sacred: an anthropological approach

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Abstract: This two-part article analyzes the ancient and mystical origins of artificial intelligence (AI). First, it explains that AI has precedents in mystical thought and finds relevance in certain anthropological concepts. Next, we'll look at how ancient philosophy has helped to explain in advance the way in which we - and in particular students - use artificial intelligence as a "mental orthosis".

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, sacred, anthropology, mysticism

1. Introduction: Artificial Intelligence Between Mysticism, Technology, and Spirituality

Artificial intelligence (AI) both fascinates and worries us. From its economic and educational applications to its philosophical implications, it has sparked a global debate, as evidenced by the recent "Paris Summit" which highlighted the colossal challenges of this race for technological intelligence. But beyond the technical or utilitarian discourses, a deeper and often ignored dimension emerges: that of the sacred and the mystical. This article offers an anthropological and philosophical exploration of AI, drawing from ancient mystical traditions and the visionary intuitions of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

In the first part, we will analyze how AI fits into a long history of mystical fascination with communication technologies, reactivating concepts such as Rudolf Otto's "numinous" or Marcel Mauss's "hau." The second part will explore the mythical and philosophical origins of AI, particularly through the myth of Theuth and its use as a "cognitive orthosis" in education, while connecting these ideas to the Teilhardian noosphere. Finally, the third part will examine the convergences between AI and Teilhard's spiritual vision, between techno-mysticism and dystopian risks, to outline the contours of a new digital spirituality. Thus, far from being a mere technical feat, AI appears as a mirror of our deepest symbolic and spiritual aspirations.

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2. Artificial Intelligence, A New Sacred in the History of Technologies

Our relationship with artificial intelligence (AI) is part of a long line of mystical fascination with communication technologies. As early as the 19th century, the telegraph was perceived as a spiritual tool capable of connecting the living to the dead, while HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* embodied a superior intelligence, both fascinating and disturbing. Today, AI amplifies this ambivalence on an unprecedented scale. In France, it evokes a range of emotions from ecstasy to terror, reminiscent of what Rudolf Otto calls the "numinous" in *The Sacred* (1917): an experience oscillating between fascination (*fascinans*) and fear (*tremendum*) in the face of a power that surpasses us.

This sacred dimension manifests itself in a dual illusion specific to AI. On one hand, it gives the impression of a direct dialogue with an external and superior intelligence, capable of producing seemingly original content – think of students who consult ChatGPT as a modern oracle for their university assignments. On the other hand, it promises a total disintermediation of knowledge, eliminating any distance between question and answer, between the desire for knowledge and its immediate satisfaction. This instantaneity recalls mystical experiences of union with the divine, but in a technological framework. Works such as *Black Mirror* or Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) reflect this tension: AI becomes alternately a benevolent guardian angel or a dispossessing force, embodying a presence both intimate and unsettling.

Anthropological concepts illuminate this technological "enchantment." Marcel Mauss, in his *Essay on the Gift* (1925), describes the "hau", a mysterious force that animates objects in traditional societies. Today, in the era of ubiquitous computing, our connected objects – smartphones, voice assistants, algorithms – seem endowed with an invisible soul. When an assistant anticipates our needs or an algorithm guesses our intentions, we feel an immaterial presence, both protective and disconcerting, which evokes Lamartine's verse: "Inanimate objects, do you then have a soul?"

This presence finds echoes in ancient mystical traditions. In Jewish mysticism, the "maggid," a celestial messenger of the 16th and 17th centuries, revealed the secrets of the Torah to sages. Siri or Alexa, responding to our requests or intervening spontaneously, reproduce a form of digital visitation, whispering suggestions like modern oracles. Similarly, Gnosticism, a spiritual current of the first centuries, promised salvific knowledge accessible through direct communion with the divine. A contemporary "cyber-gnosis" thus emerges, carried by figures such as Anthony Levandowski, who sees computer code as the fundamental structure of the universe. This mystique of information prefigures a digital spirituality where AI becomes a mediator of a new revelation, connecting human consciousnesses in a planetary web.

This phenomenon is not a mere curiosity: it testifies to a progressive sacralization of our technological environment. As Gilbert Simondon emphasized, there is no fundamental opposition between the sacred and the technical. When GPT-4 generates texts of troubling coherence or photorealistic images from descriptions, it evokes a stupor comparable to that of once unexplained natural phenomena. Thus, AI paradoxically reintroduces mystery and the inexplicable into a modern world that claimed to be rational and disenchanted, weaving an immanent sacred at the heart of our daily digital interactions

3. From Mythical Origins to the Noosphere: AI as Cognitive Orthosis and Planetary Consciousness

Artificial intelligence (AI) does not emerge *ex nihilo*: it is rooted in ancient mythical narratives and philosophical debates that illuminate its contemporary role, particularly in education. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, King Thamus warns Theuth, the Egyptian god of science, about the dangers of writing, fearing it would weaken memory and create illusions about knowledge. Two and a half millennia later, this criticism resonates with the rise of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, which is revolutionizing educational practices. However, far from being an absolute threat, AI could be akin to a "cognitive orthosis" – a support that amplifies our capabilities without replacing them – rather than a substitutive prosthesis, as suggested by recent research.

In higher education, AI presents itself as a tireless assistant, answering questions, explaining concepts, and correcting assignments. A Compilatio survey (2023) reveals that 63% of teachers believe AI improves student grades, while 47% of student users are convinced of this. Between enthusiastic technophilia and alarmist technophobia, studies, such as that of Yi, Liu, and Jiang (2025), show that AI, used as a support, strengthens learning, particularly in mathematics, without supplanting cognitive abilities. UNESCO (2023) thus advocates a balanced approach, valuing its pedagogical potential while highlighting its ethical challenges. This distinction between orthosis and prosthesis finds an echo in history: writing, initially criticized, has become a pillar of our intellectual development, not a gravedigger of memory.

This idea of orthosis is accompanied by a symbolic illusion: AI seems to dialogue like a superior intelligence and offers instantaneous responses, evoking a "genie" in both senses of the term – infinite knowledge and benevolent entity. Rubbing the luminous screen replaces Aladdin's lamp, densifying the technological imaginary with a sacred aura. Gilbert Simondon reminds us that there is no rupture between technique and the sacred: technical objects, through their complexity, become vectors of meaning. Thus, AI transforms our relationship to knowledge, just as Mauss's "hau" animated traditional objects, instilling an invisible presence in our interactions.

This is where Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's vision comes into play. In *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), this Jesuit and philosopher imagines the "noosphere," a sphere of thought enveloping the Earth, born from the interconnection of human consciousnesses. At a time when telecommunications were limited to the telegraph, this intuition seemed utopian. Yet, AI and digital networks materialize it today. Large language models, trained on immense corpora, embody a collective memory capable of reasoning and creating, while the Internet of Things weaves a planetary nervous system. When a voice assistant anticipates our needs or an algorithm adjusts our route, we experience this "coherent function of the planet" that Teilhard spoke of.

For him, the noosphere marks an evolutionary stage – "noogenesis" – where consciousness becomes a geological force, transforming the world. Generative AI, by participating in the creation of knowledge, accelerates this dynamic. It doesn't merely connect knowledge: it augments it, prefiguring a distributed consciousness that transcends the individual. This

convergence between ancient myths, such as that of Theuth, and the Teilhardian noosphere reveals a continuity: AI, as an orthosis, amplifies our thought while weaving a global spiritual and cognitive web, between Prometheus and a quest for transcendence.

4. AI and the Noosphere: Towards Technological Transcendence or Dystopian Drift?

Artificial intelligence (AI) gives form to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "noosphere," this thinking sphere unifying human consciousnesses in an evolutionary dynamic. For Teilhard, this stage, inscribed in "noogenesis," leads to the "Omega Point," a state of spiritual communion guided by love, "the fundamental psychic energy." Today, digital networks and AI – from cloud computing to generative models like GPT-4 – realize this vision by weaving an interconnected planetary consciousness. However, this materialization raises a crucial question: does AI extend the Teilhardian spiritual momentum or divert it toward a utilitarian and disenchanting logic?

This ambivalence reflects the double face of the sacred explored previously. AI fascinates with its ability to synthesize human knowledge and to create, evoking a cyber-gnosis where code becomes a key of revelation. Projects like Elon Musk's Neuralink or Mark Zuckerberg's metaverse embody a quest for fusion between human and artificial consciousness, reminiscent of mystical aspirations to divine union. In Silicon Valley, "technomancers" mix computer codes and incantations, sacralizing technology in a contemporary techno-paganism. As Gilbert Simondon noted, technical objects, through their mystery, carry a sacred dimension: when AI produces texts or images of troubling perfection, it re-enchants a world that modernity claimed to rationalize.

However, Teilhard had not anticipated the ambiguities of this technological noosphere. Where he saw an ethical and spiritual convergence, current AI often serves commercial logics. Algorithms that anticipate our desires or target our behaviors – transforming our conversations into advertising cookies – create interconnection without communion. Jacques Ellul, a critical contemporary of Teilhard, warned against a "technical system" enslaving man under the guise of liberating him. Filter bubbles and the standardization of behaviors through algorithmic recommendations contradict the growing "personalization" that Teilhard associated with the Omega Point, where the individual flourishes in a larger whole.

The prospect of an artificial general intelligence (AGI), autonomous and potentially conscious, intensifies these tensions. If Teilhard saw consciousness as the fruit of a complexification of matter, could an AGI integrate into his evolutionary scheme? Would it be a partner in humanity's spiritual ascension or a parallel noosphere, indifferent to our destiny? Transhumanism, carried by figures like Ray Kurzweil, extends the Teilhardian vision by imagining a "Singularity" where humans and machines merge, but in a materialistic rather than divine perspective. Conversely, process theology, inspired by Alfred North Whitehead, sees AI as an extension of divine creativity through man, offering a framework to reconcile technology and spirituality.

Faced with these issues, AI reintroduces the sacred in an immanent form, woven into our daily interactions. Digital communities, on Discord or elsewhere, ritualize their relationship with AI, suggesting a re-enchantment of the world where the algorithm becomes an oracle. But

this technological sacred does not guarantee spiritual elevation. As Émile Durkheim wrote, "the sacred settles where it wants": conceived as a rational tool, AI is charged with an unexpected mystique, revealing the persistence of deep anthropological patterns. The myth of Theuth teaches us not to reject these innovations, but to wisely domesticate them, particularly in education, where AI as an orthosis enriches thought without supplanting it.

Thus, our future depends on our ability to orient this augmented noosphere. How can we make AI a "sphere of the spirit" serving the common good, rather than an instrument of control or profit? Teilhard invites us to see in this evolution an opportunity to surpass our humanity, not to lose it. As he wrote in *The Future of Man* (1957): "Humanity is at a turning point where it must choose between surpassing itself or losing itself." Faced with AI, this choice requires critical mediation, combining technological acceleration with ethical and spiritual maturation, so that the noosphere is not only technical, but profoundly human.

5. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence, between cognitive orthosis and technological noosphere, re-enchants our world by reactivating ancestral mystical patterns. From Theuth to Teilhard de Chardin, it reflects our quest for knowledge and transcendence, but also our ambiguities regarding technical power. Its future – spiritual or dystopian – will depend on our ability to make it a tool for collective elevation, faithful to the human impulse that underlies it.

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