# Artificial Assistance, Spiritual Impediment: AI Chatbots and the Risk to Human Flourishing

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The central problem raised by Artificial Intelligence[1] is not the quality of work that it produces. Critiques of AI are built on shifting ground when they focus on the achievement gap between human and computer agents, for, in many contexts, AI already performs the same or better than its human counterparts. The problem, rather, is what these tools do to our relation to our own work: how they change our attention, our motivations, our habits, and our desires—in short, how they affect our natural flourishing. What we should fear is the gradual erosion of the intellectual and spiritual practices by which human beings are formed.

This essay takes that concern as its burden. I will argue that AI chatbots such as ChatGPT promise real goods—efficiency, accessibility, even degrees of excellence—but they also risk cutting us off from the practices and formation necessary for the good life. Even as this newest iteration of computer technology can improve our lives in undeniable ways, it may also obfuscate what it means for us to flourish. The task before Christians is therefore neither reactionary rejection nor naïve embrace. It is the harder thing: to discern how these tools reshape the conditions of learning and living, and to order our practices so that technology serves rather than supplants the formation of persons.

[1] The term "Artificial Intelligence" has shifted a fair amount in recent years. My use of the phrase falls within the current popular usage and generally has in mind Large Language Models.

## AI in the Academic Setting

Before turning to the spiritual consequences of AI in the church and the lives of Christians, let us begin in a context with perhaps more mild stakes: the classroom. During my graduate work, I tutored in a university writing center, working mostly with undergraduate students. My years there also coincided with the first wave of ChatGPT, as the academic world transformed into the Wild West. Version 3 had just escaped the lab, faculty policies were contradictory, and students arrived with drafts whose authorship was, to be generous, negotiable.

Of course, all of this only became evident to me as the situation unfolded. The standard format we used in the writing center was to have students read their essays aloud and then we, as the tutor, would ask them to pause so we could talk—to make a quick correction, clarify how a paragraph fit with their thesis, brainstorm further examples with them, and so on. In listening to them read, however, I started to notice that a striking number of students would stumble over their own writing, or when asked, "Why this claim here?" they would look at the page as if it belonged to someone else. Delicate conversations with the students eventually led to the realization: students had asked ChatGPT (or a similar service) to write their paper for them. The felt pressure to keep up with classes and life made AI use seem both reasonable and even expected. This much has been affirmed by at least one study finding that higher academic workload and time pressure significantly predicted greater ChatGPT use; in contrast, students more sensitive to rewards (that is, more concerned with the fruits of the assignment and doing well) were less inclined to use AI—suggesting the tool's appeal tracks stress management more than opportunism.[2]

As ChatGPT's use became more prevalent, trends emerged in how students and instructors thought about it or, specifically, the questions they were asking: Was this cheating? Are there legitimate uses of Large Language Models, short of asking them to do an assignment for you—could they be used to brainstorm? Could enough effort put into a prompt or into revising the final

[2] Muhammad Abbas, et al., "Is it Harmful or Helpful? Examining the Causes and Consequences of Generative AI Usage among University Students," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 21/10 (2024).

product make writing that had originated with AI eventually count as a student's work? What is writing for?

I was surprised that my colleagues and peers were not univocal in their answers to such questions. Some were quick to defend the use of these tools and to name the goods they offer—rapid brainstorming and outlining; iterative feedback on clarity, structure, and tone; language support for multilingual writers; quick literature triage and citation help; tailored tutoring and support. And even while this approach may stem from anxiety and a desire to not seem backward in the face of the tides of progress, the truth of this approach is hard to deny: meta-analysis has found the use of AI by students in the classroom to foster moderate positive effects on learning perception and higher-order thinking as well as a large positive effect on learning performance.[3]

Still, others have been more critical of AI's use in academia. They point to the poor writing of ChatGPT and its competitors; the essays it produces often read as stylistically formulaic, conceptually shallow, weak in argumentation, and—at times—confidently wrong. Criticism of this sort, however, seems far too pessimistic in its expectations for technology. If you can conceive of a computer doing something, then it is possible that it might. I can conceive of ChatGPT producing an essay that sounds unique and simultaneously human, that makes strong arguments, and doesn't hallucinate facts—and so I imagine that it will eventually be able to do so (and I expect it will in the very near future).

Therefore, the concerns that make the most sense to me are concerns regarding the tool's effect on the person. For instance, ChatGPT seems to create in the student a complete disinvestment in their own improvement. In the writing center, critiquing a draft no longer felt like mentoring a writer; it felt like troubleshooting a product. Any suggestions I made were met with a smile but rarely absorbed—rather, as soon as a student left my presence, they would dutifully paste my feedback into the model, which would respond with an

[3] Jin Wang and Wenxiang Fan, "The Effect of ChatGPT on Students' Learning Performance, Learning Perception, and Higher-Order Thinking: Insights from a Meta-analysis," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12 (2025): 621; see also Yuk Mui Elly Heung and Thomas K. F. Chiu, "How ChatGPT Impacts Student Engagement from a Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Study," *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence* 8 (June 2025): 100361.

improved file and no clearer sense of craft. And beyond affecting a student's capacity to write better, ChatGPT may contribute to increased procrastination, memory decline, dampened academic performance, and even loneliness.[4]

But even these sorts of critiques do not go far enough—to criticize AI solely for educational and psychological effects is still too utilitarian. There is more at stake than the output of this tool and how it leaves the user feeling. Again, it is theoretically possible that some technology (admittedly beyond the foreseeable future) is able to write a beautiful essay, say something profound, and *also* help the one giving the prompts not to grow lethargic or lonely. And yet, is there not still something wrong there? If humans no longer write books, have we not lost something? Is there not value in the task of writing itself?

## Christian Virtue and Its Formation

To understand how a tool might shift from an efficient and supportive device to an instrument of atrophy and degeneration, I think some insight can be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas on human flourishing and the development of habits, specifically virtues.

Aquinas devotes an entire section of his *Summa Theologiae* to habits and their development. He explains that habits are formed by repeated acts—to borrow Paul's language, we "train ourselves for godliness" (1 Tim 4:7). Specifically, we learn virtuous habits by reflecting on what conduces to authentic goods and imitating others whose lives instantiate those goods. The moral exemplars that we choose to imitate display virtue in practice and provide living standards by which we calibrate our own judgments, desires, and choices. Scripture and the saints supply the fullest pattern, but the point is general: we observe, we practice, we become. The more we perform the actions deemed virtuous, the more those ways of acting become second nature to us.

Thomistic habituation goes beyond simple behavioral conditioning, though, as Aquinas explains that the intellect and appetite interpenetrate in moral formation. The intellect proposes an object as good; the will chooses it; repeated choices dispose the will and the passions toward what reason judges to be fitting; and the passions, in turn, attune us to the good we ought to desire.

[4] Cathy Mengying Fang, et al., "How AI and Human Behaviors Shape Psychosocial Effects of Chatbot Use: A Longitudinal Randomized Controlled Study" (2025); Abbas, "Is it Harmful or Helpful."

What this means is that, over time, our inclinations regulate as our emotional responses are tamed and our will is ordered. The process of habituation begins to shape every aspect of our person.

Of course, this process is not done solely by our own efforts: grace perfects nature at every stage of this process. The origin and increase of virtue ultimately come from God, most obviously in those virtues God creates in us (infused virtues) but also in those virtues we develop in ourselves (acquired virtues), which are rooted in God's providential ordering of creation and are elevated by grace. Charity in particular is "the form of the virtues"—by orienting every virtue to God as our ultimate end, it makes true virtue possible and unifies the habits around their proper *telos*.[5]

In short, we are shaped in profound ways by our actions. The practices we choose to engage in become habits that form our character, for good or for ill.

Still, how Aquinas *describes* virtue tells us even more about the sort of actions that befit us. Quoting Augustine via Peter Lombard, Aquinas teaches that a virtue is a "good quality of mind, by which we live righteously."[6] As a type of habit, virtues perfect the powers of the soul so that our judgments and loves accord with reason. And "reason," here, should not be confused with some sort of Enlightenment emphasis on logic; rather, Aquinas recognizes our human reason as creaturely participation in the intelligible order of things, itself an expression of divine providence. Under God's providence, all creatures are ordered to their proper ends through the forms they possess and the relations they inhabit, and all creation is ordered to its ultimate end in God. The order of creation is a teleological reality—"Each thing is naturally inclined to the operation suitable to it according to its form."[7] In this way, virtue is not ornamental but the necessary way in which the human creature lives in harmony with the created order and under divine providence. To act virtuously is to act in a way befitting our kind; it is to be rightly attuned to the grain of creation and to move toward the end for which we were made.

This way of understanding virtue brings together two complementary registers for flourishing: happiness and well-being (or fortune). On one hand,

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[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (New York: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia–IIae.63.3.

[6] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia–IIae.55.4.

[7] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia–IIae.94.3.

happiness, for Aquinas, is "the ultimate perfection of a rational nature."[8] While we achieve perfect happiness only when we see God in the eschaton, an imperfect earthly happiness is possible now as we live a virtuous life fitting our human nature. Well-being, on the other hand, names the temporal goods—health, safety, sociability, material sufficiency—that ordinarily accompany such fitting activity but do not by themselves constitute it. Teleology links the two: the more our actions are proportioned to our nature and ordered to our ultimate end, the more they tend to yield the creaturely goods proper to our condition (though not in a strict sense: one can have comfort without virtue, and joy amid affliction). This brings together our concepts of "is" and "ought": because our nature is ordered to an end under providence, the facts of what we are bear on what we ought to do.

We find something like this Thomistic picture even in Stone-Campbell theology, that material reality is a necessary precursor to our becoming like Christ—or, to use Alexander Campbell's language, to our *regeneration*. Campbell famously orders that process: "Fact, testimony, faith, feeling, action,"[9] and even as Campbell operates out of a totally different paradigm than Aquinas, his theology of sanctification affirms that our faithful living, our bearing fruit, reflects and aligns with the order of creation.

What is clear, therefore, is that Christian modes of living—the virtues—are rooted in our God-given nature. Because our nature participates in the reason of creation and in divine providence, virtue is simultaneously descriptive (what befits the kind of creatures we are) and normative (how we ought to live). As teleological beings, virtue often results in our well-being and fortuitous results, but ultimately, it is simply what it means for human beings to live well: it is our proper way of being human, and it is already, inchoately, the good life here and now.

## AI in the Ecclesial Setting

In his discussion of habit and virtue, Thomas Aquinas begins to show us what might actually be wrong with using ChatGPT to write papers. At bottom, the problem is not that the writing style is stale or that ChatGPT makes up

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.62.1.

[9] Alexander Campbell, "Regeneration," in *The Christian System*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburg: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 269.

citations; it is that in bypassing the craft of writing and the formulation of ideas in language, such a use of technology denies us the possibility to form ourselves as people of character and, what is more, to fulfill central elements of our nature.

Do such prohibitions, however, apply equally to Christians in the world as they do to students completing school assignments? Consider the work of ministers and other church leaders, those tasked with teaching, counseling, and pastoring others: they are perpetually bogged down by chores and obligations that seem to distract them from the relational work of ministry. Would it be wrong for them to take advantage of what AI has to offer?

There are, surely, tasks that would be completely appropriate for a minister to utilize tools to complete quickly. We can imagine benign examples we'd be happy for them to outsource: volunteer scheduling and reminders, calendar wrangling and room reservations, bulletin and slide formatting, sermon closed captioning, and so on. Letting AI take over these practices frees church leaders to pray and to be present. Yet for something as central as, say, sermon preparation, the use of ChatGPT seems dubious. While Large Language Models might help a preacher find commentaries, build outlines, come up with illustrations, and even enhance rhetorical appeal, such tools cannot replace close reading and meditation, the moral imagination shaped by years of Scripture reading, or the pastoral wisdom required for giving a timely word. Reliance on automated exegesis reduces the sermon to content delivery rather than gospel sharing. Or take a slightly more mundane form of pastoral care, like drafting letters of condolence. Doing such work with AI may sound efficient, yet what it risks is the minister's own encounter with grief—the slow, awkward search for words that is itself a work of love.

Discriminating between these sorts of tasks—knowing which kind demands my full embodied involvement, and which can be skipped over with the aid of technology—requires a maturity akin to eating solid food, having our "powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:14). Our immaturity and inability to see the meaning behind our tasks derive in part from our modern instrumentalization of work. We admire production—what can be counted, scaled, and optimized—and we forget the sacramental value of our labor. We must be reminded, according to Eugene McCarraher, "that material life has sacral significance, and how we make and

use material goods has a sacramental and a moral dimension; there are sacramental—as well as perversely sacramental—ways of being in the world."[10] In decrying the "technological and organizational efficiency that entailed the industrialization of human beings," McCarraher points our attention to what is before us: "As anyone could see who cared to look at the uncalculated prodigality of nature, God was not interested in precision and efficiency."[11]

What me must prize, then, is the development of virtue and the doing of work with sacred significance. When we rely on Artificial Intelligence, we find that, rather than merely assisting human labor, it can obscure those intellectual and spiritual practices that sustain meaningful work. When Christians habitually offload the activities in which their capacities are formed, those capacities atrophy. There is no shortcut to the kind of wisdom that emerges only after years of studying the Bible. And there is no substitute for the spiritual depth that arises from prayer instead of prompts. Moreover, the activities at risk of being displaced are not merely means to other ends; many are goods in themselves—meditation and intercession, visitation and lament, the crafting of words for consolation—each a small participation in the church's priestly work. For this reason, the church must scrutinize not only what AI can do *for us* but what it does *to us* and what it takes away *from us*.

## Technology and the Formation of the Church

Many theological thinkers have sounded the alarm about the moral and spiritual drift that can accompany technological advance. Their cautions are often dismissed as Luddite hand-wringing: history, we are told, vindicates full adoption. But this is not necessarily the case. It is possible and indeed necessary to push back against technologies that are destructive of the human condition. The point is not to renounce tools as such; it is to adopt them discriminately, in proportion to their capacity to reconfigure attention, agency, and desire—to take extra care with extra-powerful tools. Our fear of the Luddite label should not keep us from pressing back where prudence requires. Not eschewal and yet vigilance in our lives with technology—that is the hardest thing.

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[10] Eugene McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019), 12.

[11] McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon*, 17, 82.

As Christians, we have not always been great at such vigilance, at preventing culture from washing over us and smoothing out our edges. But we, to our credit, have maintained a number of practices that demonstrate faithful counter-formation despite the changing times. Christians pray before meals in a culture that prizes haste. We reserve a Lord's Day morning for worship in a culture that prizes unbroken leisure. We keep some rituals that are slightly inconvenient precisely because they train us in character and virtue.

And yet, as Christians, we may legitimately ask, what about those moments when the alternative to using AI is *nothing*? Consider a student with obligations to school, a team, and a job, who must submit a personal statement by midnight or forfeit a scholarship; or a bi-vocational pastor who has spent Saturday at the hospital and the funeral home, who faces a sleepless night and a Sunday sermon. My initial inclination is to recognize the extremity of a situation and therefore acquit the truly desperate. And yet, I also recognize how easily we deceive ourselves: I'll just do it this one time, but next week, I'll be back in the saddle. As Christians, we must remain vigilant of sin—or even apathy—that crouches at the door. Even as we extend empathy to the minister, or any Christian, for whom burnout is a live possibility, we take Barton Stone's warning to heart: "for sin grows by indulgence in the fruitful soil of indolence."[12]

For discernment regarding our lives with technology, two voices are especially helpful. Shannon Vallor urges a renewal of *technomoral* virtues—habits like honesty, humility, justice, courage, empathy, and practical wisdom—cultivated not in the abstract but in our practices with contemporary technologies.[13] Vallor reminds us that a future worth wanting will be built only by agents worth entrusting it to, and that proper formation is a prerequisite for proper use. Or in a more explicitly Christian vein, Andy Crouch aims to help us orient ourselves: in a "device world," we should recover *instruments* that call forth skill, attention, and community. The way back to personhood runs through households and congregations that put people before power and

[12] Barton W. Stone, "Objections to Christian Union Calmly Considered," *The Christian Messenger* 1/2 (December 25, 1826): 26.

[13] Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting* (New York: Oxford, 2016); see also *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* (New York: Oxford, 2024).

presence before efficiency.[14] Together, their counsel underscores that only through practices which cultivate virtue and call forth genuine presence can technology be made to serve rather than subvert our flourishing.

As ChatGPT and other AI models continue to increase their reach, Christians cannot help but recognize the real advantages of this evolving technology—how these advancements save us time and effort. But just as much, Christians must recognize that such artificial assistance risks becoming a spiritual impediment, divorcing us from the ways of life that are definitive of our humanity. We see this already in something as seemingly trivial as paper-writing for school: the craft is displaced, the learner's powers go unexercised, and a product is delivered without the practice that makes a person. Aquinas helps us name what is at stake in such a loss. By repeated actions we acquire habits, and by habits we are formed in character and soul; some acts are not merely useful means but fitting operations of our nature—intrinsically good to do because they accord with our end. Against that medieval clarity of teleology stands the pressure of modern technology, whose engines simulate agency and outsource the very labors by which character is formed. The question for Christians is therefore not first what these tools can do, but which tasks must be inhabited because they shape prudence and charity, and which can be delegated without harm. We ought to resist outsourcing the practices that make us and instead lean into them as we are regenerated and made more like Christ in our everyday living. To do so is simply to consent to our nature and end. If we order our use of AI according to our human *telos*, the tools will find their place. If not, they will do our work—and, bit by bit, undo us.

[14] Andy Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* (New York: Convergent, 2022); see also idem, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).