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AI's anthropology problem

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The words 'anthropological' and 'anthropocentrism' appear eight times in Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*, the first papal encyclical dedicated to artificial intelligence (AI), published in May 2026. For a readership of anthropologists, the use of such terms might signal common ground. But the anthropology Leo is practising is not ours, and the distinction turns out to matter a great deal when applied to the rapid development and deployment of AI. When he calls for discernment of 'the anthropological vision that guides' (§94) technological development, or warns against 'cultural and anthropological' beliefs that normalize violence, he is writing within a tradition of theological anthropology – rooted in divine revelation, and committed to specific answers about the human person – rather than the comparative, ethnographic discipline that occupies us. I will return to this conceptual mismatch, because it is where, I think, the most important questions in AI governance are currently being missed. But it is worth dwelling first on what Leo gets right, which is quite a lot.

His diagnosis of AI is sharper than most discourse on AI ethics, and deserves to be taken seriously beyond religious readers. He argues with considerable precision that AI systems are not culturally or politically neutral: they encode values, concentrate power and operate as what he calls an 'invisible infrastructure' (§107) of moral assumptions built in by those who design them. He is right that this masquerades as objectivity – that the exclusion of the vulnerable gets 'cloaked in a veneer of neutrality' (§103), making injustice harder to name or contest. He is right that AI is an extractive technology, and that behind every apparently seamless digital response lies 'a long chain of mediation' (§173) – hidden labour, natural resource extraction and the unacknowledged work of millions. And he is also right that data have become a new form of colonial resource: 'colonialism', he writes, 'no longer dominates only bodies, but appropriates data' (§178), extracting health profiles, genetic maps and demographic information from structurally fragile regions. These are serious arguments, and they merit serious engagement.

In Christian theology, 'anthropology' refers to the study of the human person in relation to God – encompassing the soul and body, the *imago dei*, free will, conscience and humanity's orientation towards the transcendent good. This tradition extends from Augustine's account of body-soul unity to Gregory of Nyssa's vision of the human as defined by self-awareness and free will. For Leo, the answers are already in place before the questions are asked: the human person is a relational being, created in the image of the Trinity, possessing an inalienable dignity that no technology can legitimately override.

Social and cultural anthropologists ask similar questions – What is the human person? What does it mean to live a human life? What frameworks structure our tools and institutions? However, they begin from a fundamentally different premise: that there is no single, universal answer to such questions. The diversity of human life extends beyond customs and practices to epistemology, ontology, kinship and personhood itself – the categories by which people understand themselves and the world. Concepts that seem universal reveal themselves as particular: the individual, the body, cause and effect, agency itself. Our discipline has, of course, engaged seriously with moral

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frameworks: scholars like Joel Robbins, James Laidlaw and Didier Fassin have shown how communities construct and sustain moral worlds, with Robbins demonstrating how Christian communities in particular articulate visions of human flourishing. But studying such frameworks ethnographically is categorically different from adopting any one of them as a universal standard.

The central question in AI governance is whether we are studying plural visions of the human person or embedding one of them in the systems we build. Every AI system deployed at scale embeds some account of the human person: what agency looks like, what constitutes a normal body or legitimate desire, and how time and causation work. Systems that recommend sentences, assess creditworthiness, moderate speech and diagnose illness all operate within a particular anthropological framework, drawn from a single tradition among many.

Leo's central charge against Big Tech is that it imposes a particular moral vision as though it were universal: 'a more moral AI is not enough', he writes, 'if that morality is determined by a few' (§107). His proposed alternative – the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, human dignity, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, the civilization of love – is openly grounded in a specific tradition, and he deserves credit for that honesty. Unlike Silicon Valley, he is not concealing his values behind claims of technical objectivity. Yet the structural logic of his position replicates what he is critiquing: a particular cultural account of the human person elevated as the framework within which all questions about AI must be answered. This is not primarily a criticism of Leo – he is doing precisely what his theological tradition requires of him. It is, rather, an observation about the limits of any universalism, even a transparent and well-intentioned one, and about what it means for AI governance if we simply replace one form of universalism with another.

This is ground our discipline has traversed at considerable cost. Missionaries and anthropologists travelled together, projecting particular visions of the 'rational', individual, literate, Christian human as universal, measuring all other ways of being human as deficient against that standard. The reflexive turn of the 1970s onwards compelled our discipline to examine its own complicity in colonial knowledge production. The ontological turn went further still, arguing that what counts as a person, a relation, a cause or a time varies not just culturally but ontologically, and that Indigenous peoples were not simply differently cultured but differently minded, operating – as Viveiros de Castro and others argued – with different concepts of what exists and what matters. From that reckoning emerged not relativism but a hard-won commitment: that no single account of the human person can be treated as the measure of all others.

Leo has not made this turn, and perhaps we should not expect him to – his theological commitments are precisely what generate the seriousness of his intervention. His account of the human person centres interiority, conscience, free will and the soul. His account of the family is unambiguous: 'founded on the enduring union between a man and a woman' (§165). And in one of the encyclical's most revealing moments – almost certainly unintentional in its resonances – he calls the digital world 'a new continent to be evangelized, one that requires generous missionaries' (§238). That the universalist reflex surfaces here, in a document explicitly warning against universalism, speaks to the depth to which this logic is embedded in the tradition he is working from, even when its author is consciously trying to resist it.

Where this matters most is not in Leo's theological positioning but in what AI is already doing to the epistemological architecture of the world – a dimension that neither tradition of anthropology has yet adequately named, but that social and cultural anthropology are uniquely placed to address.

Of approximately 7,000 languages currently spoken, a minute handful dominate large language model (LLM) training corpora to a degree that renders most of the world's linguistic production statistically invisible (Joshi et al. 2020), with English alone accounting for the vast majority. The consequence reaches well beyond unequal access to a useful technology: it is the active acceleration of language death (Kornai 2013). Colonial language policy worked, as we know, by making dominant languages the medium of administration, education and economic life, structurally marginalizing Indigenous and minority languages and, in many cases, suppressing them outright. LLMs reproduce and intensify that asymmetry at scale – they make dominant languages (and concepts) faster, more generative, more economically rewarded, widening the competitive gap between languages with robust AI support and those without. The result is colonial logic reproduced by technical means, and accelerated dramatically by the economic incentives of AI development.

Languages are not interchangeable vessels for the same content – they carry distinct epistemologies, different ways of categorizing time, agency, relation, personhood and causation. When health systems trained primarily on English-language clinical data are deployed in contexts where local languages carry different models of the body, causation and suffering, they do not simply underperform – they actively impose a particular framework for what illness means, who counts as ill and what recovery looks like. What counts as cognitive decline, for instance, is itself culturally constituted, as Cohen's (1998) ethnographic work in India demonstrates. A recent UK study found that AI models trained on English-language clinical data misclassified healthy multilingual speakers as cognitively impaired at more than twice the rate of monolinguals – applying monolingual norms of cognitive functioning and diagnosing deviation from them as pathology (Pahar et al. 2026). The epistemic erasure is structural, built in at the level of training data, long before any question of deployment arises.

Leo calls for AI to be returned to 'the plurality of human cultures and ways of life' (§110), but his fixed anthropological vision cannot fully sustain that call. Genuine epistemic plurality – the kind that treats different ontologies as genuinely different ways of being human, rather than as cultural variations on a universal theme – would require relinquishing the very foundation of his argument, which is the claim to already know, through revelation, what the human person fundamentally is. That relinquishment is one neither theological anthropology nor the AI systems it is attempting to influence seems prepared to make.

The question Leo poses – what vision of the human person should guide AI? – is a timely one. It is, I would argue, the most important question in AI governance today, and almost entirely absent from the technical and regulatory discourse that currently dominates the field.

Where we might part company with Leo is on the answer. The emerging discourse of AI ethics has moved quickly to adopt the language of 'human rights' and 'human dignity' as its governing principles – concepts that are themselves the products of a specific historical and cultural formation, Western, liberal, post-Enlightenment, whose universalist pretensions our discipline has spent decades subjecting to scrutiny. Leo's version of universal

Cohen, L. 1998. *No aging in India: Alzheimer's, the bad family, and other modern things*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Joshi, P. et al. 2020. The state and fate of linguistic diversity and inclusion in the NLP world. *Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*, 6282–6293.

Kornai, A. 2013. Digital language death. *PLoS ONE* 8(10): e77056.

Pahar, M. et al. 2026. Can we trust AI to detect healthy multilingual English speakers among the cognitively impaired cohort in the UK? An investigation using real-world conversational speech. *arXiv*: 2602.13047.

humanity – rooted in the *imago dei* and Catholic Social Teaching – is more explicit about its foundations, which is at least epistemically honest. But both share the assumption that there exists a correct account of the human person from which governance frameworks can be derived and universally applied.

What our discipline's long reckoning with universalism reveals is something rather more disruptive than a better anthropology of AI: that epistemological, ontological and cultural diversity must be treated as a foundational design challenge, not an afterthought to be addressed downstream. That evaluating AI systems against the specific communities they affect, and the self-understandings

those communities hold, matters more than testing them against any universal template. And that the question of who gets to define 'the human' in these systems is itself a question of power, one that expertise alone cannot resolve.

Leo ends *Magnifica Humanitas* with the image of rebuilding Jerusalem brick by brick: one people, one God, one account of the good at the centre of history. What both our anthropological traditions might contribute to AI development is precisely the opposite insight: that the challenge here is not to replace Silicon Valley's unexamined universalism with a more principled one, but to build without a centre altogether – to design systems genuinely capable of sustaining a world that is, and has always been, plural. ●

'The most extreme case'?

Editorial by Gustaaf Houtman

A committee of 10 senior scholars has pronounced on the state of the humanities and reserved its bleakest verdict for anthropology. In this issue, Jonathan Marks takes the long view of the charge, and Agustín Fuentes turns to what the discipline should do now. Ed.

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In April 2026 a committee of 10 senior scholars, chaired by the philosopher Paul Boghossian and convened at the request of the chancellors of Vanderbilt and Washington universities, delivered a *Report on the state of scholarship in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences* (Boghossian et al. 2026). Its members included Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kit Fine, Gideon Rosen, the historians Sean Wilentz and Katherine Fleming and, from our own discipline, the Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich. The charge was to test a now-familiar complaint: that scholarship in these fields has subordinated the pursuit of understanding to political ends, and in doing so has loosened its hold on the standards of evidence and argument that justify public support.

The report is more careful than much of its reception has allowed. It rejects the complaint in its 'bald form', insists that serious work continues in every field it examined and says nothing in it warrants anything more intrusive than a first step: 'an intensive study of the units in question' by broad-minded experts.

Its central charge, even so, is that scholarship has been bent towards a conception of social justice 'associated with the progressive left'. It also looks outward, to the federal and state interventions now bearing down on American universities, from the 1776 Commission to the instruction given to a Texas A&M philosopher to drop Plato from his syllabus, and to foundation money on the left.

* * *

The report's sharpest verdict falls on our own discipline: 'In the most extreme cases (e.g., anthropology), we see a widespread deterioration in scholarly standards grounded in a pervasive repudiation of ideals of objectivity together with a toxic intellectual climate in which reasonable dissent on politically charged topics is routinely suppressed and punished.'

It is on its own evidence that the report is most exposed. It grants, on its fifth page, that its conclusions are 'provisional' and not yet supported by the kind of quantitative evidence a peer-reviewed study would require, and that its examples illustrate the trouble rather than establish how common it is. From that admission it still reaches a verdict its evidence cannot carry: that anthropology is the most extreme case. The same gap shows in its quantifiers. The examples of scholars who 'explicitly repudiate' the pursuit of knowledge are described, deeper in the document, as arising 'in rare cases', while the verdict those cases are meant to support speaks of a 'pervasive repudiation'. Nothing in between bridges the two statements.

The document is itself unreviewed and its underlying field reports unpublished, and its authors reached their verdict from the published record, read only 'where possible', without putting their findings to the American Anthropological Association, its editors or its scholars, though an anthropologist and a linguist sat on the panel. One of its authors has since said as much: 'For field-specific points and evidence, folks will have to wait for the internal reports' (Lochan et al. 2026).

A report that asks a discipline to meet a standard it does not itself meet, and that judges a field of fieldwork without doing any, invites the questions its own method cannot dodge. One signatory, writing in *The Washington Post*, praised the report as 'careful to avoid painting with a broad brush' in the same column that declared anthropology 'seems to have largely abandoned the idea of truth independent of political utility' (Morson 2026).

Akhil Gupta, a former president of the American Anthropological Association, says the authors made the 'cardinal academic error' of taking his paper out of context (Whitford 2026). The difficulty is what it makes of the work it quotes. It prints a passage from Khiara Bridges, taken from her primer on Critical Race Theory (Bridges 2019), in which she sets out, four times over, what postmodernism 'proposes' and what is true 'according to postmodernism', and introduces it as 'Bridges endorses a radical perspectivalism about truth'. The passage is exposition, the ordinary work of a teaching text setting out a school of thought, but the report presents it as a creed of her own. Its own reference list, which calls the book a primer, gives the game away. The same move recurs with Fernando Villanea, a population geneticist whose two-page polemic (Villanea 2023) is quoted with, in the report's own words, 'boldface added', and then pronounced 'incoherent'. A report that lectures a discipline on the difference between describing a view and holding it might have kept the distinction itself.

It is worth asking who reached the verdict. The charge came from two university chancellors who, six months before commissioning the report, had called the 'creeping politicization' of campuses a crisis they could not ignore (Diermeier & Martin 2025). They then ordered an inquiry that found the politicization they had announced, and the chair chose the other nine members himself. The preface calls them 'an independent group', though one of its authors has since taken office as a dean at Vanderbilt, one of the two universities that commissioned the work. Of