

On Digital Immortality's (Un)Broken Connection. Exploring the Potential for Meaning-Making Cooperation Beyond Life and Death

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This paper undertakes a comprehensive exploration of Digital Immortality, which has become an increasingly significant topic within the thanatology and the sociology of death. As technological advancements continue accelerating, the notion of immortality—preserving memories and honouring the legacies of those who have passed—has emerged as a focal point in contemporary scientific discourse. The digital landscape, characterised by its virtually limitless storage capacity, provides an unprecedented opportunity to preserve and access data related to deceased individuals, enabling the living to connect with and remember their loved ones in new ways. Historically, the ability to maintain the memory of individuals was primarily restricted to traditional forms of monumentalisation, such as tombstones, memorials, and biographies. These forms typically aimed to support a person's memory fixedly, resulting in an intact and unchanging representation over time. However, the framework for memory preservation is now undergoing a significant transformation, mainly due to dramatic advancements in artificial intelligence technologies. This evolution signifies a substantial shift in our interactions with the memories of those who have died, expanding how we can memorialise and engage with their legacy. Previously, social media platforms such as Facebook and early blogging sites allowed individuals to maintain a limited connection with their deceased loved ones through shared memories, posts, and photographs. Nevertheless, introducing artificial intelligence—especially in the form of modern chatbots or “thanabots”—fundamentally redefines these interactions. Scholars are increasingly examining the implications of this complex development as these AI-driven conversations become genuinely interactive and may provide deeper insights into our relationships with the deceased. This paper aims to investigate both the specificities and the limitations of this novel type of interaction, shedding light on how digital immortality resembles or diverges from past practices of memorialisation. Moreover, it emphasises the continuity of intentions and perspectives present in the phenomenological debates of the last century, illustrating how our understanding of memory and death continues to evolve. By engaging in this retrospective analysis, this work contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding digital immortality and encourages a more nuanced and cautious approach to the ethical and emotional implications of these emerging technologies.

Keywords: Digital Immortality, Symbolic Immortality, Online Social Mourning, Thanabots, Two-way Meaning-Making

Introduction. The Circle of Life

Death has always been an intricate matter¹. Death represents the sudden, unedited, and frightening end of our conscious contribution to life as genuine beings. In a way, we are afraid because we do not know what will become of us in the next world, but, on closer inspection, neither do we in *this one*. When we are gone, the impact on those who still live becomes uncertain and unmeasurable. We wish to leave a good memory and a message, but the truth is that we are not quite sure. However, we are sure indeed that our *heirs* continue to exist, just as it happened for us with our *predecessors* on this planet. In their time, those who came before us gave us life and then left, the same way we eventually do with other people, be they our children, nephews, or loved ones. By heir or predecessor, I mean a broad definition of someone even implicitly aware of humankind generations' *precedence* and *succession* over her particular existence, i.e., the fact that the world will continue to exist after us the same way it did when we were not around. For instance, the fact that the alternation of days and seasons will continue to regulate our lives, that we will continue to deem some things more important and others less so—all that makes the world a *human world*. Indeed, it is true that we die alone, but others survive, taking something of us with them. The nurse who will say goodbye for the last time, the acquaintance who will wonder why she no longer meets us at the bar, or the bills that will still be in our name for a while. The world continues its race; it's only we are no longer part of it.

Fresh Perspectives on Timeless Questions. Navigating Death and Survival in the Digital Age

Nonetheless, our experiences, memories or influence are partially recovered since they live on in the reminiscences and perhaps stories our successors eventually share about us. To date, this seems to be the only thing we can hope for to circumvent individual death *generatively*, i.e., leaving something of us beyond our passing. Still, this may be a little². If I die, you will remember me within the physiological limits of your memory and our mutual friends. You will recall when I told you that joke, that time you were so mad at me, and that might even put a smile on your face. However, one

¹ I sincerely thank Dr. Khadiza Laskor for the guidance she provided in writing this paper. Her expertise on the theme of symbolic immortality has been invaluable to me. I also express my gratitude to the reviewers for their comments; they significantly helped me enhance my writing and expand my thesis.

² Jankélévitch, 2008.

day, we will all be gone, and *retention* limitations will prevent our successors from preserving even the minimal trace of our existence. Tombstones, signs, obituaries, and other *analogic* means traditionally postpone this eventuality while granting a solid distinction between life and death and how we ultimately leave the former and enter the latter³. More recently, technology and *digital* capacities have also taken on this role, raising new questions given the more and more complexity of the tools we currently employ for memory conservation⁴. Data storage systems are essential for the long-term safeguarding of human historical records, allowing us to maintain a comprehensive archive of information. Moreover, in the context of the Internet, the notion of complete disappearance is increasingly problematic; once information is shared online, it becomes nearly impossible to eliminate.

In this paper, I will briefly explore the diverse ways we engage with concepts of death and the deceased through the lens of contemporary technologies and the possibilities of survival or *immortality* they provide. This analysis will begin with a rapid survey of the historical evolution of digital technology within the field of thanatology. Then, I will examine how technological advancements, particularly *artificial intelligence* and derived chatbots, have transformed (?) traditional mourning practices, elevating them to supervenient capacities of concrete *meaning-making interaction*. Specifically, I will highlight how older methods, such as *one-sided* or *one-way* online interactive mourning platforms that allow individuals to express grief with limited interactive engagement, have become increasingly obsolete. As new technologies emerge, they offer us more dynamic ways to connect with the memories and legacies of the deceased, thereby reshaping our relationship with mortality itself. In my discussion, I also articulate how this remarkable technological achievement resonates with a profound longing inherent to the human spirit: the deep-seated desire to maintain connections with others and to keep their memories alive among us. This yearning for connection speaks to our fundamental need for relationships, continuity, and belonging⁵.

In this essay, I assert that the interactions facilitated by artificial intelligence introduce a potentially new pathway for these connections. However, it is crucial to note that they do not represent a converted *transcendental* condition of experiencing this everlasting *spiritual bond*. In my reading, speaking with a chatbot does not resurrect people better than visiting a graveyard, crying at a tomb or reading, again and again, old letters that were formerly sent to us. Indeed, death still represents an impassable limit and

³ Ariès 1974.

⁴ Hurtado 2021.

⁵ Hurtado 2023.

something we cannot experience as such, as Heidegger would claim. Still, rather than transcending our human condition, these technological interactions may offer a different form of engagement and more reliable practices of remembering and communicating with the dead and their experiences. To clarify this claim, I will first examine the concept of *symbolic immortality*. I will particularly reference the insights of theorists such as Lifton and Bauman, who delve into how we historically sought to preserve our legacies beyond our physical existence. Additionally, I will incorporate perspectives from prominent 20th-century phenomenologists whose works provide a rich philosophical framework for understanding the nuances of human experience and the implications of technology on our existence, knowledge preservation and eventual advancement. Through this comprehensive analysis, I aim to shed light on the complexities of human connection in an age increasingly defined by digital interactions.

Symbolic Immortality. Founding the *Eternity of Conversation*

The theme of death and the concern about which form of *survival* brings forth (if any) was not born with technology and its promises of imagination (Kastenbaum 2001). Anytime, myths and religions promptly answer our ancestral necessities and fears. We want to be sure our existence will not end with death or recognise in death a passage between existential domains that does not coincide with total destruction. We want to know that we will still *be* or be *something else*. In Dante's *Comedy*, for instance, the souls of the wicked face punishment in hell, while the virtuous are rewarded in heaven. Whether one is a good or an evil human being, the essence of a person persists beyond their physical body and the flawed world they finally depart. This quest for continuity, raw or naive forms of *immortality*, has been thoroughly examined, not only within the context of religious beliefs or the anthropological factors that inform them. In the last century, some of the most insightful definitions of our deep yet often unspoken desire for endurance have emerged from the theorists of *symbolic immortality*. This concept has been notably explored by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton⁶ and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman⁷.

In *The Broken Connection* (1979), Lifton explores a significant shift away from Freud's drive theory, instead aligning his thoughts more closely with the views of his esteemed mentor, Erikson. Through a detailed examination of symbolism and imagination, Lifton endeavours to bridge the historically

⁶ Lifton 1974.

⁷ Bauman 1992.

entrenched divide between life and death, probing their intricate and often paradoxical relationship. He argues that *symbolism* functions as a primitive yet profound mechanism for separating and referencing something beyond itself, serving as a vital tool for humanity to transcend the confines of mortality partially. Lifton posits that this engagement with symbolism allows for a unique form of survival and perpetuation of meaning liberated from traditional religious superstition. By utilising the process of symbolisation, he contends that all forms of human creation—whether art, language, or cultural practices—become interconnected across different epochs and contexts. This interrelation enables them to resonate with one another, weaving a rich tapestry of human experience and understanding⁸. Ultimately, Lifton suggests that this process fosters a sense of immortality that is both prolific and pluralistic. This notion implies that through the creative expression of symbols, individuals can achieve a lasting impact that exceeds their physical decay, allowing for a continuity of meaning and influence that spans beyond the boundaries of time and life itself⁹.

On the same wavelength, in *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life*, Baumann explored an intriguing concept referred to as immortality “by proxy,” emphasising the role of human objectification and cultural artefacts in achieving a form of lasting existence¹⁰. Essentially, this concept suggests that the creations of humanity, be they artistic, literary, or technological, obtain an extratemporal value. This is the case because they can transcend time limitations by being utilised and appreciated by multiple individuals across different generations, thereby propagating indefinitely. The influence of those who have passed away continues reverberating through their contributions as long as we acknowledge their accomplishments and integrate their teachings into our lives. Their legacies live on, influencing current and future compeers. Baumann’s argument gains further depth when he discusses the fundamental role of techniques, mainly *writing*, in facilitating this form of survival. He highlights how writing not only preserves knowledge but also immortalises individual experiences. Baumann also quotes Edmund Husserl to elaborate on this point, stating that when an ancient scribe meticulously records pertinent information, as was the case in Ancient Egypt, in his illustration, she appropriately “allocates immortality to mortal lives” and

⁸ Vigilant, Williamson 2003.

⁹ Here, one must also recognise the pioneering work of Blumer on *symbolic interactionism* (1962) and, even earlier, Mead’s (1934), focusing on the immediate, implicit, or generalised intersubjective reference of every human act.

¹⁰ Baumann 1992, 31.

“endows the events and the deeds with the lasting quality of memorable and remembered tradition”¹¹.

This procedure highlights the transformative power of writing as a medium that captures and conveys human experiences across time. Moreover, written tradition is critical in this framework, as it guarantees the continuity of existence and knowledge sharing. Finally, Baumann introduces the concept of the “eternity of conversation”, which refers to the continuous dialogue between individuals across generations—an ongoing union or intergenerational reunion made possible through these technical means¹². This enduring bond fosters a connection between *conversationists* from all eras, allowing them to engage with, learn from, and build upon the wisdom of those who came before them¹³.

Phenomenological Generativity and Meaning Survival. On Instrumental and Intergenerational Cooperation

In this context, Bauman’s reference to Husserl is not accidental. However, in *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*, Bauman does not quote Husserlean passages where the *writing* topic is treated with greater poignancy. Let us analyse some of them and see how possible forms of *symbolic immortality* also gain prominence in phenomenological literature. In *The Origin of Geometry*, the third appendix to paragraph §9 of *The Crisis*¹⁴, Husserl examines how meaning can be instituted, sedimented, and eventually reactivated in its original form by countless interpreters, as particularly evident when considering mathematical discoveries and geometric theorems. From this perspective, writing is crucial in transmitting such meanings across generations without losing this singular pureness. Indeed, oral expression, on its own, is not sufficient for this task. Here, Husserl contends that oral communication lacks the “persisting existence of the ideal objects”, which refers to the actual discoveries involved, “even during times when the speaker and his fellows are no longer so related or even are no longer alive”¹⁵. For Husserl, writing ensures this persistence and meaningful survival of content over time. Moreover, it facilitates processes of “communalization” and “infiniti-

¹¹ Baumann 1992, 60.

¹² Baumann 1992, 60.

¹³ Gadamer (2004, 389) speaks of a “hermeneutical conservation” that grants access to “past humanity.”

¹⁴ Husserl 1970.

¹⁵ Husserl, 1970, 360. As Gadamer states, in writing “language gains its true ideality, for in encountering a written tradition understanding consciousness acquires its full sovereignty” (Gadamer, 2004, 392).

zation” of meaning, enhancing our cultural capacities and allowing us to transcend the limitations of individual and societal memory in retaining and conveying knowledge¹⁶.

Eugen Fink presented a similar argument in his commentary on these passages. In paragraph §11 of the *Sixth Meditation*, he emphasises that “it is not enough for scientific truths simply to be known”¹⁷. He asserts that these truths must be expressed in sentences, research reports, and textbooks to be recognised as evident as such. Only through this process of objectification—through outward expression via language and writing—can “Objectivity” achieve its intersubjective validation and attain a “duration superior to that of all human duration”¹⁸. This process is fundamental to recognising what Fink and Husserl define as *transcendental intersubjectivity*¹⁹. Fink specifically argues that because human beings are finite and limited by birth and *death*. Hence, the objectification of scientific truths in a relatively non-transitory medium becomes necessary. Indeed, science can only be “infinite”, i.e., extend through the finite spans of past and future generations of researchers²⁰. For Fink, this ideal continuation represents the ultimate mission of every phenomenologically justified epistemic endeavour: the possibility of “addressing oneself to fellow humans”, “conveying phenomenological knowledge to them”, and ultimately inspiring the sense of the phenomenological inquiry within them²¹. All of this is accomplished by objectifying transcendental knowledge into expressive means, which will be eventually retrieved by *geometricians* to come.

In line with these considerations, Maurice Merleau-Ponty also outspreads beyond the technique of writing the possibility of transmitting meanings beyond individual death, i.e., multiplying them on to future generations and *collaborating* with those who will one day take our place. Indeed, in *Signs*, he addresses *painting* and arts as unitary and intergenerational chores whose different contributions should be seen in continuity as the legacy of artists of all ages who keep communicating with each other through their works (and despite their departure). Accordingly, for Merleau-Ponty, every conceivable work of art pertains

to the universe of conceived painting as a single task stretching from the first sketches on the walls of caves up to our ‘conscious’ paintings. No doubt one reason why our painting finds something to recapture

¹⁶ Husserl 1970, 365.

¹⁷ Fink 1995, 103.

¹⁸ Fink 1995, 103-104.

¹⁹ Husserl 1977; see Stiegler 1998, 229.

²⁰ Fink 1995, 104.

²¹ Fink 1995, 124.

in art which are linked to an experience very different from our own is that it transfigures them. But it also does so because they transfigure it, because they at least have something to say to it, and because their artists, believing that they were continuing primitive terrors or those in Asia and Egypt, secretly inaugurated another history which is still ours and which makes them present to us²².

Moreover, the “first sketches on the walls of caves” actually “called forth an indefinite future of painting, so that they speak to us and we answer them by metamorphoses in which they collaborate with us”²³. Indeed, we – in the quality of modern artists – persist in painting because we resonate with the same *terrors* our ancestors faced and unite through various forms of artistic expression. In this way, we become participants in a rich tradition and pay tribute to those who have come before us by reinterpreting their earlier representations. In the realm of artistic expression, Merleau-Ponty highlights that through the processes of medial transfiguration or metamorphosis, the contributions of individual and all-time artists are not lost. Rather, each artist inspires a wave of imitators or movements that enable their messages to echo across generations, even implicitly, just as they themselves were influenced by those who came before them. From this viewpoint, every artistic movement and expression of meaning embodies the *infinite generativity* of humanity and its everlasting legacy. Indeed, phenomenology recognises an intrinsic unity within this generativity, along with its boundless potential to extend over time, all while preserving a connection to its profound and perhaps mythical origins. However, it is evident that this omnitemporal linkage would only be achievable with the use of technical and technological means, such as writing and painting, which enable its expression, as appreciated in Husserl’s, Fink’s and Merleau-Ponty’s commentaries. Such materiality or (digital) immateriality, as we shall see in a moment, gathers the instance or desire to preserve human genius from the wear and tear of time and maintain a link with past acquisitions, without which it would be impossible to build a relative future.

However, as apparent, the development of new technologies again prompts questions about the meaning we should attribute to this preservation and the sense of *metamorphosis*, *transfiguration*, and *collaboration* with the deceased that such tools permit us to enact. Let us understand what this brings forth in the following.

²² Merleau-Ponty 1964, 60.

²³ Merleau-Ponty 1964, 60.

Exploring Online Social Mourning. Questions and Replies

Before exploring one of the central themes of this article—namely, the phenomenon of online social mourning and its forms of interaction with the deceased—it is crucial to elaborate on the reasons why this subject is closely linked to the concept of symbolic immortality and previous phenomenological concerns. The desire for continuity beyond physical death has been a persistent theme throughout history. This longing reflects our need to maintain connections with those who have passed away and ensure that their memory endures. Writing, the arts, and culture in general serve as powerful mediums through which we strive to fulfil this desire. These techniques or technologies capture not only our relationships but also our collective efforts to reinterpret and preserve these connections, allowing us to find renewed significance in them within our present lives. I think modern technologies' evolution has not altered this core aspiration. Instead, they have opened new ways for expressing our desire for connection and continuity, making participation through the *platforms* that grant this possibility accessible, potentially fair and more and more popular²⁴. Still, the very same *act of writing* on web pages or *posting* content online has fundamentally altered how we communicate and convey meaning, offering capabilities that differ markedly from traditional methods, such as reading books or interpreting codes.

This shift in communication extends beyond mere information exchange, as it did in classical phenomenology. It also introduces a novel opportunity to externalise and maintain connections with those who have passed away. On social networks, for instance, the presence of deceased individuals can remain palpable due to the ongoing existence of their profiles. Here, there is no real ontological separation or difference: the profiles of the living intermingle with those of the dead, unless they are deleted by someone, and the only tangible distinction is the potential inactivity of the latter compared to the industriousness of the former (although this is not always the case)²⁵. This phenomenon allows for a unique, albeit ambivalent, dialogue with the

²⁴ Ciolfi 2012, 82. However, it is undeniable that economic issues play a significant role here. Not everyone can afford a smartphone, for instance, to create a social profile and post. Therefore, there is a latent problem of digital representation, as some authors have noted (see Ohman 2024). Access has increased, no doubt, but it is certainly not yet universal. I will elaborate on this later.

²⁵ For years, we have witnessed the gradual abandonment of Facebook for several reasons (see Ohman and Watson 2019). These include the rise of new, more stimulating and engaging social networks, such as TikTok and Instagram. Additionally, many individuals simply become tired of the platform or fall into the category of *Social Media Introverts*—those who consciously post very infrequently. The profile of the latter, in some ways, does not differ much from that of a deceased person, except for the number of views they perform. This complexity makes the situation so intricate.

deceased, as friends and family can continue interacting with their memories and thoughts in a shared online space. A few years ago, some authors argued that this was particularly evident when confronting the phenomenon of *online social mourning* via platforms like *Facebook*²⁶. On *Facebook*, posts on walls dedicated to recently gone individuals seemed like an attempt to outlast their legacy and the continuity of their sensible involvement²⁷. Accordingly, *posting* would naturally incarnate the appeal to extend dead people's bonding and duration and prolong a human story destined to end. This is no different from what was said earlier about symbolic immortality and its instruments. Authors concluded that deeds like posting, commenting on or sharing *Facebook* posts contributed to keeping dead people alive and *kept us*, as inheritors, in a way. Indeed, coming to terms with the death of a loved one is profoundly complex. So is when death involves someone who passed away too young or under circumstances we reckon absurd or unjust²⁸.

But the phenomenon of online social mourning also tells us something else. As some scholars have reported, many online *posters* addressed the deceased as if they could read their messages and respond *in some other way*, sending them signals that they interpreted as genuine *replies*²⁹. This curious awareness also enabled survivors to hold very naive conversations, made up of proto-forms of *exchanges* that allowed them to keep abreast of what was currently happening in their lives³⁰. As seen in the cases of symbolic immortality and phenomenological interpretations (particularly Merleau-Ponty's), the ideals of continuity and connection empowered survivors to *build upon* the deceased's actions or profound aspirations. This allowed them to fulfil the wishes of those who have passed or achieve goals that the departed

²⁶ Kasket 2011; Sisto 2016.

²⁷ Pitsillides, Jefferies, Conreen 2012, 59, 65.

²⁸ Daily reports serve as a stark reminder of the victims of femicide—young, vibrant women whose lives are tragically and violently cut short. Interestingly, we can observe that deceased individuals do not entirely disappear (Francis et al. 2005). They remain in our thoughts and are frequently mentioned in conversations, and their memories live on in our daily practices. *I act this way because they would have done so*. Our actions seem to align with their intentions or wishes: we feel a strong bond with their aspirations and, *phenomenologically*, we sense ourselves generatively continuing their meaning. *They would have desired the best for us*, and it appears that our task is to carry on this legacy. This connection seems to transcend mortal bounds. We often get the impression of being seen or heard. We can distinctly sense the potential praise or disapproval stemming from an action we intend to take (*if my grandmother could see me, etc.*). This motivates us to do good things and discourages us from actions we believe they would consider wrong.

²⁹ Kasket 2011, 253-257.

³⁰ Still, this has been introduced before. Fun fact: In Italy, it was historically common for deceased relatives to reveal in a dream which numbers would later come up in the following week's lottery draw; indeed, there are numerous instances of winnings (even substantial ones).

would have pursued had they still been alive. As a result, this gave rise to a distinctive model of *intergenerational cooperation* that still needs to be fully addressed to date. On an emotional counterpart, this newborn manner of interaction, however primitive, let these people find comfort in the belief that the deceased remained in some way by their side, supporting them in their daily lives in the community of their intent and consoling them, however partially, for their absence. Through the action of posting, survivors made known the actions their loved ones had performed in life and, curiously enough, sought her backing for their *mortal* frailty³¹. Nonetheless, the nature of posting on social media platforms tended to be almost entirely *one-sided*. In this dynamic, the post and the poster herself functioned as the sole active participant, leading to a scenario where most requests made by users were often trivial and failed to represent genuine inquiries.

This singularity raised interesting questions about the motivations behind such posts. Many individuals who sought assistance or advice were not necessarily looking for new perspectives; rather, they predominantly sought guidance or affirmation regarding choices they had already made. They tended to ask questions like, “Am I doing the right thing?” fully aware of the answers that resonate within themselves. Moreover, it was highly unlikely that the deceased could provide insights that are both unprecedented and extraordinary. Indeed, their experiences effectively ceased at the moment of their death, which transformed them into static entities on platforms like *Facebook*, akin to frozen snapshots of their lives that echo through time³². In this sense, while individuals may articulate questions directed toward the deceased, the notion of receiving responses from them has always seemed nearly inconceivable as such.

AI’s Revolution. When the Departed Speak Again!

However, this understanding is nowadays evolving, especially in light of the recent advancements in artificial intelligence and the introduction of in-

³¹ Simon, 2012, 92-93. Indeed, cases in which survivors appeal to the divinatory powers of the deceased were not uncommon.

³² The people who died, in this sense, truly died. We have memories and perspectives of them that are interrupted at the time of their departure or at our last memory of them. Right now, my father is the same age my grandfather was when he passed away. As comforting as it is to believe that the two of them might meet again in another life, as depicted in Iñárritu’s film *Biutiful* or the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*, my grandfather is a man who died almost twenty-five years ago. For my father and me, he remains just as he was (he is still in his sixties, not eighties, and we find it very difficult to imagine him so old). From this perspective, the fact that my grandfather could have had a Facebook profile would not have changed anything at all.

novative tools within this realm. These technologies have begun to alter interaction models on platforms such as Facebook, enabling new forms of engagement that extend beyond conventional boundaries, namely, a one-sided form of interaction with an immobile and separate entity. As a result, the landscape of how we connect with both the living and the deceased is gradually shifting, inviting deeper contemplation on the nature of communication in the digital age. Compared to just ten or fifteen years ago, when Facebook reigned as the most advanced and widely used social network, technology has remarkably evolved. Consequently, the challenges related to the broader theme of personal survival and *digital immortality* have now reached unprecedented levels of intricacy.

Contemporary advancements in AI and software engineering have introduced new complexity to what we previously generally defined as *online social mourning*, allowing for interactions that were not previously possible through simple Facebook post interactions or emoji reactions. This density has prompted numerous interpreters to question the meaning assumed by these newborn means and their supervenient capacities. If a chatbot³³ – or *thanabot*³⁴, i.e., one replicating the personhood of a deceased human being – actually *answers* my pain and keeps a meaningful conversation with me through a messaging app that synthesises the memories, personality and *generative content potential* of that very deceased person, we can perhaps say that through us – i.e., me and the chatbot I am speaking with – this person *relives* and tells me something conceivably unheard of³⁵. Furthermore, if we allow her to relive, the replicated sense of presence from the deceased can also collaborate with me, being present in my life and potentially establishing *new coordinates of meaning* through this process of endless interaction³⁶.

³³ A chatbot is software designed to simulate and recreate conversations with human users. By definition, it must replicate – or at least strive to emulate – a fully credible personality in its interactions with interlocutors. The term was coined by Michael Mauldin in the 1990s, but its history dates back to the dawn of computational thinking. These models are progressively improving and pushing previously unthinkable limits (see Henrickson 2023).

³⁴ Sherlock 2013, 166.

³⁵ This is undoubtedly unprecedented. Previous technologies did not, in a sense, allow for the *resurrection of the dead*. Rather, it was the intentions, desires, and ambitions of the deceased that were prolonged in those of the living, giving rise to an *intentional continuity* that late phenomenology has sometimes questioned. From this perspective, technologies such as writing offered the means for this handover to assume a *transcendental* and thus foundational tone in the inheritors' experience, rather than being merely a *contingent* fact (see Merleau-Ponty 1964, 68; Merleau-Ponty 1973, 54). However, as I will clarify later, it is always the living who serve as the custodians and are responsible for this continuation. Therefore, even AI is not a genuine game changer but simply raises the bar a little higher, with serious repercussions from an ethical and moral point of view that need to be investigated at this historic moment.

³⁶ Modern platforms, such as *Eterni.me*, introduced similar services over a decade ago,

This is what was experimented with *JessBot* within the so-called *Project December* program³⁷. Let us see how. *Project December* was intricately developed using the capabilities of GPT-3, a cutting-edge natural language generation system that has recently gained widespread recognition for its effectiveness. So, Joshua Barbeau, a Canadian engineer grappling with the loss of his late ex-girlfriend Jessica—who passed away tragically eight years before—sought a way to preserve her memory and possibly a contact with her. Inspired by his deep emotional connection to her, he created a character named *Jessbot*, using *Project December*’s means. To bring *Jessbot* *back to life*, Barbeau trained the *Project December* chatbot using a wealth of past Facebook conversations he had exchanged with Jessica and various online data about her. This meticulous approach yielded awe-inspiring results, allowing *Jessbot* to exhibit a remarkable resemblance to real-life Jessica’s former personality and living essence. The combination of deeply personal experiences, cherished memories, and Barbeau’s *expectations*, drawn from both the rich online material related to Jessica and the extensive capabilities of the chatbot, facilitated what can be described as a unique *hermeneutic* or *meaning-making process*, i.e., the creation or institution of entirely new bonding settings compared to the earlier relationship Joshua had with his ex-girlfriend. This development enabled what Henrickson defined as a sort of “symbiosis of action”³⁸ between the realms of the living and the deceased³⁹.

although they encountered various structural limitations (Sisto 2016, 35-37; see Bassett 2022, 39). *Eterni.me*, for instance, aimed to create a digital representation of individuals to preserve their legacies after death. By gathering data from social networks and various online sources, *Eterni.me* crafted a digital avatar that enabled the deceased to continue interacting with others. This interactive legacy was sustained through posts and chatbots, facilitating communication and transcending their physical absence. Such digital heritage encapsulates the deceased individual’s opinions, beliefs, and passions, allowing users to learn more about them. However, unlike the dynamic nature of Facebook posts, this model does not provide for genuine evolution or the ongoing existence of the deceased. Despite the use of this software, the personality and habits of the deceased remain static over time, significantly limiting the range of possible interactions.

³⁷ Henrickson 2023.

³⁸ Henrickson 2023, 956.

³⁹ Undoubtedly, such an undertaking raises significant ethical and moral controversies. Beyond the potential for reviving the actual Jessica in this manner, it remains entirely unclear what the real Jessica would have desired for her future and her conceptual legacy. In this regard, the legislation is somewhat ambiguous and still evolving. For instance, it is difficult to determine whether Barbeau’s operation is entirely lawful. Additionally, it is not straightforward to ascertain whether *Jessbot* can be equated with Jessica, and what ontological status should be attributed to her conversational output, which stems from a vast amount of data that certainly cannot reconstruct Jessica’s entire personality, at least for now, and perhaps what Jessica could have become. The cases of writing and painting examined by phenomenology were undoubtedly less controversial: painters from different epochs did not share the possibility of being, so to speak, altogether *in the same room*. They could not live side by side, even though they *generatively* faced the same vicissitudes.

Indeed, it was observed that chatbots like *Jessbot* could establish a captivating “middle ground” where the living and the deceased can connect, exchange thoughts, and cooperate on potentially new endeavours⁴⁰. This innovative approach eases a profound exploration of grief, memory, and the human desire to sustain connections with those we have lost. It also encourages us to examine the brand-new *two-way* dialogue or exchange these platforms create with the deceased⁴¹. In contrast to online social mourning, which often highlights *one-way* loss and shared grief, the application of artificial intelligence and chatbots offers a distinctive opportunity to seek answers to our questions genuinely. These advanced technologies have the potential to provide information and forge an assembly to the vast reservoir of creativity and wisdom that humanity has amassed over time. Engaging with AI can access various perspectives and insights, deepen our understanding of our inquiries, and link us to the *collective intelligence* that spans different cultures and eras. While this represents a significant advancement for those exploring the concept of *symbolic immortality*, it is important to acknowledge that its application also has some – and maybe temporary – limitations.

Conclusion. Question(s) and Provisional Outcomes

This said I believe that while it is crucial to acknowledge the promising potential of emerging technologies designed for interacting with deceased individuals, we must also consider the substantial boundaries that these capabilities face in real-world applications. These technologies often offer a unique opportunity for individuals to connect with the memories or personas of lost loved ones, but the actual experience remains deeply reliant on the *living*⁴². Indeed, the responsibility for engaging with these services predominantly falls upon those who seek them out, frequently at a price⁴³. These individuals

Moreover, they did not love each other. Although these topics are intriguing, what I would like to emphasise here is the significance of the relationship between a living human being, Barbeau, and the software designed to communicate with him.

⁴⁰ Henrickson 2023, 950.

⁴¹ Basset, Henrickson 2023; Morse 2023.

⁴² Henrickson 2023, 959.

⁴³ The significance of this *cost* was also briefly emphasized earlier. The real risk is that not all of the deceased can be *resurrected*, and this might occur solely for economic reasons. The number of servers and their substantial energy consumption are factors to consider, particularly from an ecological perspective. The same could perhaps be said of books and paper in general, albeit on a possibly different and ideal scale. In a hypothetical, constantly updated library, such as Borges', where it is not actually feasible to keep all the volumes, which ones should be discarded? Which memories should be erased? Which experiences should be deleted altogether, depriving them of any form of experiential continuation? Therefore, there will always be individuals and memories that are more important than

provide the crucial input—such as personal anecdotes, questions, or emotional context—that forms the basis of the interaction. This material, while essential, only indirectly translates into meaningful exchanges. The actual value and depth of these experiences emerge primarily from the thoughtful engagement of those who are left behind, as they are the ones who actively shape the dialogue and seek to extract significance from the interactions with this technology. It may be, again, only a matter of time and research on artificial intelligence will shed light on this, and perhaps tomorrow, we can truly become, in the course of our cooperation, as living and dead, “reciprocal creators”⁴⁴ of each other’s experiences.

At this juncture, however, some conclusive questions emerge. If we consider that death embodies a fundamental fear of humankind, with our greatest desire being immortality or the indefinite extension of our existence, we must clarify the role of technology in nurturing these new and intricate dynamics of potential *intergenerational cooperation*. In other words, does technology respond to a need it did not initially create, thereby serving as an ancillary support to our hope of preserving one’s existence? Or does technology play a primitive role in redefining the parameters of life—and death—preservation? In light of this exploration, when examining the concepts of symbolic and phenomenological immortality, I believe the truth still aligns more closely with the first alternative. Consequently, artificial intelligence acts as a *facilitator* rather than a transformative force in our quest for the resurrection of the dead, to date, as a pursuit that remains a wish and a mission genuinely transcending the boundaries of space and time.

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others, just as is the case with gravestones in cemeteries and, in a way, for the homes we inhabit and every aspect of our lives on this earth. In conclusion, this form of two-way cooperation seems dangerously exclusive nowadays and perhaps far less liberating than it promises to be. This is the case not so much for the actual improvements it makes, but for the confidence we are now placing in its means.

⁴⁴ Bassett 2022, 141.

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