

## DIVINE INTELLECT, HUMAN INTELLECT – AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE? A REINTERPRETED METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE DEPARTING FROM CHRISTIAN WOLFF

Intelecto divino, intelecto humano – e inteligência artificial? Uma perspectiva metafísica reinterpretada a partir de Christian Wolff

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to investigate the relationship between the concepts of divine intellect and human intellect as a philosophical background for the discussion of artificial intelligence. We take Christian Wolff's philosophy as our philosophical reference for the discussion, this being perhaps the last great account of the subject prior to Kantian criticism against traditional metaphysics. In the first section, we present Wolff's definition of "intellect" [*Verstand*; *intellectus*] as the faculty to represent distinctly that which is possible, that is, which is not contradictory. In the second section, we compare the notions of the (imperfect) human intellect and of the (perfect) divine intellect. Finally, in the third section, we draw considerations about the possibility of artificial intelligence as a kind of intellect between human and divine intellect – departing from key insights from Wolff's philosophy but reformulated for contemporary debates.

**Keywords:** divine intellect; human intellect; artificial intelligence; Christian Wolff.

**Resumo:** Este artigo busca investigar a relação entre os conceitos de intelecto divino e intelecto humano como pano de fundo filosófico para a discussão acerca da inteligência artificial. Assim, tomamos a filosofia de Christian Wolff como nosso referencial filosófico para a discussão – que foi, possivelmente, a última grande abordagem do tema anterior às críticas de Kant à metafísica tradicional. Na primeira seção, apresentamos a definição de Wolff de "intelecto" [*Verstand*; *intellectus*] como faculdade de representar distintamente aquilo que é possível, isto é, aquilo que não é contraditório. Na segunda seção, comparamos as noções de intelecto humano (imperfeito) e de intelecto divino (perfeito). Por fim, na terceira seção, elaboramos considerações acerca da

possibilidade da inteligência artificial como um tipo de intelecto entre o intelecto humano e divino – a partir de aspectos-chave da filosofia de Wolff reformulados para debates contemporâneos.

**Palavras-chave:** intelecto divino; intelecto humano; inteligência artificial; Christian Wolff.

## Introduction

Artificial intelligence has seemingly come to stay. What appeared to be a feature of a long-distant future from our favourite science fiction movies and series has now entered the homes, classrooms, and offices of entire countries. Daily, a significant number of human beings rely on platforms from different tech companies to ask for information on regular issues, but also to aid their – our – decision making. The temptation is clear: as human beings, our knowledge, our analysis of reality is mostly limited; but helped by almost state-of-the-art computer programs, we can reach for the stars. That is, artificial intelligence has made human life easier in the sense that it seems to be able to interpret the world in a more complete way than we, human beings, ever can. And it seems to do so because it can process an amount of information that we cannot process, because we are limited by our human condition (our limited five senses, the limited processing of information in our minds, and so on). Can artificial intelligence supplant human intelligence? – some might ask. Could it be the case that, someday, we will want to shut down our minds, let computer programs process reality for us, while we just steer them for our human purposes?

This may be the temptation of artificial intelligence: that human beings acknowledge another kind of intelligence as greater than our own and, therefore, entrust to it the kind of information processing that we cannot do. In the history of Philosophy, the relationship between human intelligence and an even greater intelligence has been thematised by several philosophers – but not regarding artificial intelligence, which is a rather contemporary issue. Instead, from philosophical tradition, we know the counterpoint between imperfect human intelligence and perfect divine intelligence – that is, God's perfect intellect. A tradition that is famous – even if controversial – is the 18th century German rationalism. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, for instance, insisted that the choice for the creation of this world – the world in which we live – comes from God's representation (that is, knowledge) of all possible worlds, thus finding in this one the greater amount of possible perfection in a way that can be brought about. Such representation is only possible because it occurs to the most perfect intellect – that is, divine intellect. To be sure, there is a huge gap between considering God's perfect intellect as the source of the creation of the world



and our daily use of artificial intelligence tools. However, there is a substantial feature for us to consider: the notion that an intellect other than our own can know better. That said, can we compare a traditionally metaphysic conception such as the divine intellect with an almost post-metaphysical reality of the advent of artificial intelligence?

In the current paper, we aim to thematise this and other questions. Our main goal is to consider the traditional relationship between (perfect) divine intellect and (imperfect) human intellect, seeking to understand our current, and future, relationship with artificial intelligence. For these purposes, we shall depart from a quite unusual philosophical point of reference: the 18th century rationalist Christian Wolff (1679-1754). Our decision to choose Wolff was based on two features: firstly, Wolff develops in a systematic way many of Leibniz's key insights on the subject; secondly, even if it seems a form of archaic metaphysics for our contemporary perceptions, Wolff's systematic account of the matter serves to pose interesting questions on the subject even today. An interesting feature is, for instance, the fact that Wolff, much like his mentor Leibniz, thinks of God's intellect almost as a computer in the contemporary sense – which is a trace of the Mathematic-based pretensions of the rationalistic method. God knows every feature of this world and of all worlds, because he knows the interconnection of all possible things – much like a program of artificial intelligence seems to know everything that is on-line.

This this paper is divided into three sections. (1) In the first section, we start from the definition of intellect [Verstand; intellectus] in Wolff's philosophy and its relationship with Leibniz. The first question for us to pose here is: can an artificial "intelligence" be a kind of intellect? (2) In the second section, we present the counterpoint between divine intellect, which is perfect and knows all things, and human intellect, which is imperfect and, therefore, limited. In this regard, we will consider Wolff's correspondence with Leibniz on the subject, as well as Wolff's account in works like the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, the *Psychologia Empirica*, the *Psychologia Rationalis*, and the *Theologia Naturalis*. (3) Finally, in the third section, we draw considerations about where artificial intelligence could be located in the dynamics between divine and human intellect. Our hypothesis is that from a more traditional perspective, as well as from a more updated perspective, even if artificial intelligence seems closer to a divine intellect in the sense that it appears to process more information than human intellect, it lacks substantial features to be considered closer to the divine intellect than to human intellect.



## 1. Verstand and intellectus in Wolff

Christian Wolff defines the intellect<sup>1</sup> – in German *Verstand*, in Latin *intellectus* – at two main moments: in his German works and in his Latin works. In his 1712 *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Kräfften des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauche in Erkänntniss der Wahrheit*<sup>2</sup> (his *Deutsche Logik*), he gives us three definitions of intellect: “a faculty to think what is possible”<sup>3</sup>; “a faculty to think the possible”<sup>4</sup>; and: “a faculty to represent distinctly that which is possible”<sup>5</sup>. All three definitions mean the same thing: the intellect is the faculty by which one knows that which is possible – which Wolff will define within his system of metaphysics as that which does not entail a contradiction (cf. *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 12).

However, it is not only the faculty to think that which is possible; it is the faculty to think *distinctly* what is possible. The feature of distinctiveness is crucial to distinguish the intellect from other faculties of knowledge, as Wolff calls them, departing from philosophical tradition – such as senses<sup>6</sup> and imagination<sup>7</sup>. For Wolff, there are two axes of representation<sup>8</sup>: the distinction between clear and unclear representations, and the distinction between distinct and indistinct representations. A clear representation is that which can distinguish one thing from another; the unclear representation is not able to do this (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, §§ 198-199). Our senses and imagination are capable of such

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<sup>1</sup> Intellect is not at all an undisputed concept in the History of Philosophy. The very translation as “intellect” as a concept from an 18<sup>th</sup> century system of philosophy is the subject of discussion. The Kantian scholarship, for instance, receives the German word “*Verstand*” as “understanding”, along the lines of English and French early modern philosophies. However, in Latin, the concept reads as “*intellectus*” – and, in that regard, most of Medieval philosophy follows its respective translation as simply “intellect”. Leibniz and Wolff are two philosophical figures that stand between both *momenta* – so that, in their context, the translation as “understanding” or “intellect” is mostly related to the way one aims to interpret them – whether as Kant’s predecessors, or as continuators of some sort of Scholastic philosophy. Given that our topic on this paper entails matters of natural theology and, therefore, is also connected to a great extent with the Scholastic account, we chose to call it simply “intellect”.

<sup>2</sup> Our quotations from Wolff follow the editions in the *Gesammelte Werke* and the Bompiani edition (in the case of the *Deutsche Metaphysik*). We use the abbreviated version of the title of each work, alongside the information about the volume of the work (if applicable), and the notation of the respective paragraph. Other works follow standard author-date style of quotation.

<sup>3</sup> *Deutsche Logik*, Vorbericht, § 10: „ein Vermögen zu gedencken was möglich ist“.

<sup>4</sup> *Deutsche Logik*, Cap. 1, § 15: „Der Verstand ist ein Vermögen das mögliche zu gedencken“.

<sup>5</sup> *Deutsche Logik*, Cap. 1, § 36: „[...] ein Vermögen deutlich vorzustellen, was möglich ist“.

<sup>6</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 220: „Die Gedancken, welche den Grund in den Veränderungen an die Gliedmassen unsers Leibes haben, und von der körperlichen Dingen ausser uns veranlasset werden, pflegen wird Empfindungen, und das Vermögen zu empfinden die Sinnen; die Gliedmassen aber, darinnen sich diese Veränderungen ereignen, die Gliedmassen der Sinnen zu nennen“.

<sup>7</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 235: „Die Vorstellungen solcher Dinge, die nicht zugegen sind, pfelegt man Einbildungen zu nenne. Und die Kraft der Seele dergleichen Vorstellungen hervorzubringen, nennet man Einbildungs-Kraft“.

<sup>8</sup> On the subject, see: Lanzini Stobbe, 2023, p. 44-48; Lanzini Stobbe, 2024.

distinction, and so is our intellect. However, a distinct representation is that which provides us with knowledge about the reason [*Grund*] of such a thing (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, §§ 206, 214) - that is, *why* it exists instead of not existing. Our intellect is, *par excellence*, the faculty capable of such kind of representation – which neither our senses, nor our imagination are capable of. Wolff highlights this point in the definition of intellect in his 1720 *Vernünfftigen Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen* (his *Deutsche Metaphysik*):

The intellect is the faculty of representing distinctly the possible. Here, the intellect is different from senses and imagination, since, left alone, their representations are clear at best, but not distinct: on the other hand, where it concerns the intellect, the same representations become distinct<sup>9</sup>.

It is by means of the intellect – and not by means of senses or imagination – that one obtains knowledge of the reasons of things. The intellect grounds reason (*Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 372) [*Vernunft*] as the faculty of an insight into the interconnection of these reasons<sup>10</sup> [*Gründe*] in the world. Only by trusting and correctly using our intellect and reason may we achieve the mastery of reason over our senses, imagination, and affects – which is a pivotal feature of Wolff's practical philosophy<sup>11</sup>.

Wolff maintains the same definition of intellect in his Latin works. Particularly in his *Psychologia Empirica* we read that: "The faculty to represent things distinctly is called intellect"<sup>12</sup>. In the Latin works, he includes the helpful distinction between higher and lower faculties of the soul – both concerning the faculties of knowledge (which interest us here) and the faculties of appetite. The criterion for such classification is the distinction between the capability of producing clear but indistinct representations and the capability of producing clear and distinct representations. Thus, the higher faculties of knowledge are the intellect and reason (grounded in the intellect), whereas the lower faculties are senses and imagination. This distinction brings great systematic precision to the formulation of Wolff's account but is already somehow implied in the German works.

We shall see in the next section that there is a tension between human intellect and divine intellect – grounded on the fact that human intellect is limited and, therefore, imperfect.

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<sup>9</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 277: „Das Vermögen das Mögliche deutlich vorzustellen ist der Verstand. Und hierinnen ist der Verstand von den Sinnen und der Einbildungs-Kraft unterschieden, daß, wo diese allein sind, die Vorstellungen nur höchstens klar, aber nicht deutlich seyn: hingegen wo der Verstand dazu kommet, dieselben deutlich werden“.

<sup>10</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 368: „Die Einsicht, so wir in den Zusammenhang der Wahrheiten haben, oder das Vermögen den Zusammenhang der Wahrheiten einzusehen, heisset Vernunft“.

<sup>11</sup> On the subject, see: Klemme, 2019; Lanzini Stobbe, 2023, p. 53-70.

<sup>12</sup> *Psychologia Empirica*, § 275: "Facultas res distincte repraesentandi dicitur Intellectus".



Nevertheless, we pose the following question already at this point: from what we see – and know – about programs with so-called artificial intelligence, does it seem to be the case that such programs may have a capability of representing possible things – and representing them distinctly, that is, discovering their reasons? We shall resume this issue in the final section.

## 2. The counterpoint between divine and human intellect<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between divine intellect and human intellect was a topic of Wolff's interest even prior to his German works. In his correspondence with Leibniz – initiated after the successful discussion of the former's *Habilitationsschrift* (1703) – Wolff writes to Leibniz, when talking about the concept of perfection and the notion of regularity:

[...] I must be shown that the divine intellect is supremely perfect. I already assume that the divine intellect is the simultaneous and adequate representation of all possible things, and I see that altogether more things can be observed in it than in another intellect limited either on account of its object or on account of its mode or form. However, it seems to me that I must prove that in the divine intellect, everything which can be conceived in an unlimited intellect is observed, and that the unlimited is more perfect than the limited (Leibniz; Wolff, 1989, p. 232; From Wolff to Leibniz, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1715).

In a previous letter, Leibniz had presented Wolff with his own definition of perfection as: “the degree of positive reality, or what comes to the same thing, the degree of affirmative intelligibility, so that something more perfect is something in which more things worthy of observation [*notatu digna*] are found” (Leibniz; Wolff, 1989, p. 230; From Leibniz to Wolff, Winter 1714-1715). In this way, as Wolff points out, there must be more things worthy of observation in God's intellect than in any other intellect – which makes sense, given that it is the proper representation of all possible things at once. Nevertheless, Wolff's problem concerns the distinction between limited and unlimited intellect – since he takes God's intellect to be of the latter kind. Leibniz's reply reads as follows:

The more there is worthy of observation in a thing, the more general properties, the more harmony it contains; therefore, it is the same to look for perfection in an essence and in the properties that flow from the essence. I am astonished that you ask what it is to be more regular, since I have already shown that it is that which provides more general rules or general observations. Nothing is more regular than the divine intellect, which is the source of all rules, and produces the most regular, that is, the most perfect

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<sup>13</sup> We intent to offer here a reconstruction of Wolff's key arguments on the subject. Therefore, as secondary literature, we also depart from the following studies: École, 1985, p. 123-129; École, 1990, p. 355-368; 172-179; Theis, 2018, p. 232-234; Lanzini Stobbe, 2023, p. 44-52.



system of the world, the system that is as harmonious as possible and thus contains the greatest number of general observations (Leibniz; Wolff, 1989, p. 233; From Leibniz to Wolff, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1715).

Leibniz's answer to Wolff focuses on the notion that the divine intellect is the source of all rules and, therefore, the source of all regularity in the world. In other words, we may also say that, for Leibniz, it is the source of all *intelligibility* in the world (between the reasons within all things) – and it is precisely this that is meant when he addresses the notion of something being “worthy of observation”, that is, of being known.

This brief interaction between Leibniz and Wolff concerning God's intellect serves as a departure point for us to consider Wolff's own treatment of the notion – mainly within his psychology and natural theology. In short, it is in the empirical psychology that Wolff addresses the notion of intellect as a faculty of the soul, as we saw in the previous section. However, it is in rational psychology that Wolff proceeds to consider in further detail the notion of the perfect intellect – which, in turn, sets the ground for the exposition in natural theology. In *empirical psychology*, we discover that human beings possess an intellect, but that it is never “pure”<sup>14</sup>, because the human condition includes other faculties – like senses and imagination – in the process of obtaining knowledge from the world. In *rational psychology*, Wolff investigates the notion that, although human intellect is limited and, therefore, imperfect, there can be an intellect that is perfect. Finally, it is in *natural theology* that we recognise such intellect to be God's intellect.

We may notice already, from the correspondence with Leibniz, that the whole discussion about the divine intellect concerns the Leibnizian notion of God's choice of this world as the best possible world to be actualised – that is, to be brought to reality. For Leibniz, as it will be for Wolff, God can only choose this world as the best possible world – whereby its greater perfection is ultimately the criterion here<sup>15</sup> – because he represents all possible worlds simultaneously. He does so precisely because of his perfect intellect, the only intellect capable of such complete representation of all possible worlds.

This notion is crucial for us to understand the key difference between divine intellect and human intellect. As Wolff points out in the *Deutsche Metaphysik* and in the *Psychologia Empirica*, the human intellect cannot simultaneously produce such a distinct representation

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<sup>14</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 285: „Unter dessen weist es die Erfahrung und wir werden es an seinem Orte erweisen, daß unser Verstand niemahls gantz reine ist, sondern bey der Deutlichkeit beständig noch viel Undeutlichkeit und Dunckelheit übrig bleibet. Dessen ungeachtet kan man doch einem jeden Vermögen der Seele zueignen, was ihm gehöret, und dadurch vermeiden, daß nicht durch zweydeutige Reden zu Mißverständnissen Anlaß gegeben werde“.

<sup>15</sup> On the subject, see: Blumenfeld, 1995.



of all that is. Thus, we can neither have a complete representation of this existing world, nor can we have a complete representation of any other possible worlds as such – because the world is a composed being that entails far too many features for us to process distinctly in our process of obtaining knowledge. In a word, our intellect is limited.

However, the consciousness of such limitation and, therefore, of such imperfection of our intellect also points to another intellect that, in its turn, is not limited. Such an intellect is a “pure”<sup>16</sup> intellect, unlike the human intellect – to use Wolff’s precise terminology. In this way, the greater intellect does not suffer the influences of lower faculties of knowledge, such as senses and imagination, being therefore able to produce distinct representations undisturbed by the negative influence of these lower faculties. In the *Psychologia Rationalis*, Wolff identifies such intellect as the intellect of the “most perfect spirit” [*spiritus perfectissimus*] – defined as “that <spirit> which enjoys the most perfect intellect and the most perfect will”<sup>17</sup>. As features of the notion of the most perfect intellect, we have that: (1) it distinctly represents all that is possible<sup>18</sup>; (2) it is the maximal intellect, or the absolutely highest intellect<sup>19</sup>; and (3) it is unlimited<sup>20</sup>. Precisely at this point Wolff contrasts it with the human intellect, stating that, unlike the most perfect intellect, it is limited<sup>21</sup>.

Once shown that the human intellect cannot be the most perfect intellect, Wolff identifies the latter as the divine intellect in both volumes of the *Theologia Naturalis*. He starts by stating that God possesses an intellect<sup>22</sup>, since he represents all possible worlds including the one that exists. Thus, there are two objects of such representation of God: all possible worlds, and himself<sup>23</sup>. In two words: all that is possible and, in fact, all that is knowable<sup>24</sup> [*cognoscibilia*]. God’s knowledge of all things, produced by his intellect, is both

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<sup>16</sup> *Psychologia Empirica*, § 313: “Intellectus dicitur purus, si notioni rei, quam habet, nihil confusi admiscetur nihilque obscuri. Non purus dicitur, si notioni rei insunt, quae confuse aut prorsus obscure percipiuntur”; *Psychologia Empirica*, § 314: “[...] Intellectus purus est, si a sensu atque imaginatione liber est, & in tantum quidem purus est, in quantum a sensu atque imaginatione liber”.

<sup>17</sup> *Psychologia Rationalis*, § 646: “Spiritus perfectissimus est, qui intellectu perfectissimo & voluntate perfectissima gaudet”.

<sup>18</sup> *Psychologia Rationalis*, § 647: “Intellectus perfectissimus dicitur, qui omnia possibilia sibi repraesentat distincte”.

<sup>19</sup> *Psychologia Rationalis*, § 648: “[...] intellectus perfectissimus est omnium maximus, seu absolute summus”.

<sup>20</sup> *Psychologia Rationalis*, § 652: “Intellectus spiritus perfectissimi illimitatus est”.

<sup>21</sup> *Psychologia Rationalis*, § 654: “Intellectus hominis admodum limitatus est”.

<sup>22</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 122: “Deo competit intellectus. Etenim Deus sibi distincte repraesentare valet omnes mundos possibiles & in his mundum, qui existit, adspectabilem (§. 121). Quamobrem cum facultas res distincte repraesentandi sit intellectus (§. 275 Psychol. empir.); Deo competere intellectum evidens est”. For the corresponding argument in the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, see: §§ 953-979.

<sup>23</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 141: “Deus omnes mundos possibiles atque semetipsum cognoscit”.

<sup>24</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 154: “Deus cognoscit omnia, quaecunque cognoscibilia sunt”.



distinct<sup>25</sup> and simultaneous<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, it is an intuitive knowledge<sup>27</sup>, not a deductive knowledge – because it takes place at once. As Wolff defines it: “The divine intellect is the distinct and simultaneous representation of all that is possible”<sup>28</sup>. A pivotal feature of God’s intellect is that it is an act, and not a faculty<sup>29</sup> – unlike human intellect, which is defined precisely thus (cf. *Psychologia Empirica*, § 275). This is the case because God represents *all* that which is possible *simultaneously*. That is, there is no margin for a more complete representation, or for alternative kinds of representation: his representation of all that which is possible is already, at once, complete.

Indeed, Wolff proceeds to classify the divine intellect as unlimited<sup>30</sup>, endless<sup>31</sup>, the most perfect<sup>32</sup>, the absolute highest<sup>33</sup>, immense<sup>34</sup>, and pure<sup>35</sup>. Contrasting divine intellect with human intellect, we can see that human intellect is quite the opposite: it is limited, finite, imperfect, and impure. Even if we can achieve a distinct representation of some things in the world, we cannot have a distinct representation of *all* things, let alone of all things *simultaneously*. This is the reason why Wolff states that: “the divine intellect differs from the human <intellect> precisely if one regards the object or the mode of cognition and lacks the limitations <of the human intellect>, which are found in the cognitive faculty of our soul”<sup>36</sup>. In short, although both the divine and the human intellects are kinds of intellect, the former is an imperfect kind, and the latter is a perfect one.

It is also interesting to notice, as Wolff asserts, that: “The divine intellect is incomprehensible for the human being”<sup>37</sup>. This statement surely follows from what has been said. However, the notion of the incomprehensibility of God’ intellect for us, mere imperfect beings, creatures of God, is curious. After all, even in our daily experience we might find

<sup>25</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 156: “*Deus omnia cognoscit distincte, quae praeter ipsum cognitu possibilia sunt*”.

<sup>26</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 160: “*Deus omnia cognoscit simul*”.

<sup>27</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 104: “*Deus omnia cognoscit intuitive*”.

<sup>28</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 164: “*Intellectus divinus est distincta & simultanea omnium possibilium repraesentatio*”. See also: *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 115: “*Intellectus divinus est omnium possibilium singularium & universalium distincta ac simultanea repraesentatio*”.

<sup>29</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 163: “*Intellectus divinus actus est, non facultas*”. See also: *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 114: “*Intellectus divinus actus est, non facultas*”.

<sup>30</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 166: “*Intellectus divinus prorsus illimitatus est*”.

<sup>31</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 167: “*Intellectus divinus infinitus est*”.

<sup>32</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 168: “*Intellectus divinus perfectissimus est*”. See also: *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 116: “*Intellectus Dei est omnium perfectissimus*”.

<sup>33</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 169: “[...] *intellectus divinus omnium maximus, seu absolute summus est*”.

<sup>34</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 176: “*Intellectus divinus immensus est*”.

<sup>35</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 178: “*Intellectus Dei purus est*”.

<sup>36</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 165: “[...] *intellectus divinus ab humano prorsus differt, sive objectum, sive modum cognitionis spectes, atque caret limitationibus, quae in facultate cognoscitiva animae nostrae dantur*”.

<sup>37</sup> *Theologia Naturalis*, I, § 174: “*Intellectus divinus homini incomprehensibilis est*”.

people who think they can somehow discern some of God's providential designs – even if it is certainly not likely that a single human being would be so self-confident as to affirm to know all of God's plan for his Creation.

At any rate, the fact that human intellect is imperfect seems to be an uncontroversial fact – even if the actuality of a perfect intellect such as the divine intellect is without doubt a matter for discussion in contemporary philosophy, after Kant's famous criticism of traditional metaphysics. The notion that we do not know everything, and cannot know everything, is – unfortunately – very familiar to us. But what do we think about the notion of an intellect more perfect than our own - be it utterly perfect, or simply more perfect than ours? Could an intellect that is more perfect than ours, but not the most perfect, be that of an Angelic form (as the Scholastics would argue) – or even of an artificial form, such as a program of artificial intelligence?

### **3. Artificial intelligence between divine and human intellect?**

Thus far, we have presented the notions of divine intellect and human intellect in a rather exegetical way concerning Wolff's philosophy and its relationship with Leibniz. Now, our goal is to expand our discussion toward contemporary problems regarding our relationship with the development of artificial intelligence programs. There are two ways of doing this: (1) we could attempt to elaborate a thought experiment by which we consider what Wolff and his philosophy could say about the progress of such programs; and (2) we could draw insights from the Wolffian perspective to problematise our subject in a philosophically-informed way (in the sense of an insight recovered from an argument within the history of Philosophy). The first kind of approach may prove itself to be an unfruitful one, since there could be little to gain from a thought experiment of this sort – after all, the relevance of the study of Wolff's philosophy itself is mainly for historical reasons, that do not comprehend an application in artificial intelligence as we know it today. Therefore, the second kind of approach seems to be more interesting for our purposes here.

To be sure, Leibniz does play a role in the history of artificial intelligence. If we regard Stuart Russell's and Peter Norvig's pivotal handbook on artificial intelligence<sup>38</sup>, arguably the most important handbook on the subject even today, we find mentions of Leibniz concerning historical issues that were part of the development of the field of artificial intelligence. For

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<sup>38</sup> I refer to its third edition (Russell; Norvig, 2013 – Brazilian edition). There is also a fourth edition (from 2020) but, concerning our intent in this paper, the third edition suffices.



instance, regarding the philosophical foundations of artificial intellect, these authors mention (cf. Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 7) Leibniz's attempt to develop a machine that could calculate using several operations, instead of only subtracting (like Pascal's machine); and they mention rationalism as a relevant philosophical school (thus also referring to Descartes). Furthermore, they refer to Leibniz's idea of reducing logic inferences to a purely mechanical process applied to formal language (cf. Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 240); as well as to Leibniz's introduction of the classic notion of probability (cf. Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 442) and relevance as a source for game theory (cf. Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 598). Surely, Leibniz is mentioned as a historical aspect in the development of the field. Along these lines, we should keep in mind – and this is something that almost all philosophy after Kant has forgotten – that Leibniz and, for that matter, Wolff were relevant in the field of exact sciences in their own time, even if, philosophically, they were left aside as heralds of an archaic form of metaphysics.

The fact that Wolff is not mentioned in Russell's and Norvig's handbook does not imply that his philosophy – which, concerning the subject of our paper, draws from Leibniz's philosophy in a substantial stance – is of little significance for research such as ours. In fact, Wolff may be a suitable philosophical reference for our focus here, because he departs from Leibniz (not without originality) by offering a more systematic approach to our topic of discussion: the relationship between divine intellect and human intellect, which we will now thematise against the topic of artificial intelligence.

In the first section of this paper, we saw that Wolff defines the intellect as the faculty of distinctly representing that which is possible, that is, that which does not involve a contradiction. In the second section, we present the differences between human intellect, which is limited and imperfect, and divine intellect, which is unlimited and perfect. In his metaphysics, Wolff thinks to have proven God's complete distinct knowledge of all things, of all possible worlds, of this world, and of himself. In our contemporary reading of the dynamics between an imperfect intellect such as ours and a perfect intellect such as God's intellect, we must highlight two key departing points: (1) it is reasonably undeniable that our human intellect is limited or imperfect – or any other related predicate. After all, this is a fact that experience itself proves to us, even in our daily lives. No human being is entitled to say that he or she possesses a perfect intellect because, already in the next second, he or she may commit an error of judgment concerning the most trivial issues. (2) On the other hand, our contemporary interpretation of the perfect – or most perfect – intellect is ambiguous at best. After Kantian criticism, we can no longer claim to prove anything about God's actuality



and, for that matter, about divine intellect. The fact that human intellect is imperfect, and the conceivability of an intellect more perfect than our own (and perhaps also of the most perfect intellect) is no longer a guarantee either for the actuality of the most perfect intellect, or that such an intellect belongs to God as an actual being.

The tension between the *conceivability* of an intellect more perfect than our own – be it merely a more perfect intellect, or the most perfect intellect – and the *actuality* of such an intellect is of great importance for our discussion here. Traditionally, authors like Thomas Aquinas have defended the notion of angelical intellect – the intellect of the angels as beings that are more perfect than human beings, but less perfect than God, the most perfect being. In our rather contemporary reading of the subject, such is the conceptual gap where one *could* aim to locate, at least in theory, artificial intelligence.

There are several tendencies of interpretation of the artificial intelligence phenomenon, from long before the developments of deep learning that we have seen in recent years. Here, we mean not only scholarly tendencies, but also general perception of the phenomenon. Sparingly, we could group these tendencies generically into optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of whether a computer problem can think. Science fiction has been a prolific field in both ways; but scholarly research has also been divided between poles of interpretation. The main point of discussion is whether an artificial “intelligence” may one day become an intelligence itself, in its own right. In fact, after the recent developments in deep learning, artificial intelligence programs have long surpassed the traditional criteria of the Turing test, which used resemblance with human speak as the criterion to judge whether a program may be considered “intelligent”. Leaving aside the whole controversial discussion about the relationship between intelligence and consciousness, for our purposes here, a relevant question would be: can a program of “artificial intelligence” be said to possess an intellect?

From the Wolffian perspective, as we discussed previously, it seems doubtful that a computer program could achieve a point in which it develops a faculty to represent distinctly all that which is possible. However, let us examine the notion closer. Intellect as a metaphysical faculty, in Wolff’s terms, is a notion that could perhaps be reframed for our post-metaphysical framework. Indeed, in the *Deutsche Metaphysik*, Wolff defines<sup>39</sup> faculty

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<sup>39</sup> *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 117: „Es muß aber die Kraft nicht mit einem blossen Vermögen vermenget werden: denn das Vermögen ist nur eine Möglichkeit etwas zu thun: hingegen da die Kraft eine Quelle der Veränderungen ist (§. 115.), muß bey ihr eine Bemühung etwas zu thun anzutreffen sein“. So, faculty is distinguished from the concept of force [*Krafft*], which is the source of the modifications.

[*Vermögen*] almost in a generic way as a possibility to do something – which could make room for a softer reading that interprets even computer programs to have something of this kind, as a set of tools in their own programming or build. That such programs may have representations and, for that matter, distinct representations is also open to interpretation: does it suffice that they see the interconnection of and within the data they process? Are they able to acknowledge a causal relationship within the amount of information they gather and process from this interconnection, in the sense of obtaining knowledge of the reason of a thing? But, perhaps most decisively, since it is a *re*-presentation, does it necessarily imply the need for a consciousness in the strong sense that acknowledges this whole processing of information?

These are questions that are not so easily answered – partially because they entail a significant number of definitional features like: what is a faculty? What is a representation? What is consciousness? But also because the recent progresses in the implementation of artificial intelligence do not yet suffice for us to have a clearer understanding of where the field of artificial intelligence may lead us. Therefore, herein, we cannot simply judge whether an artificial intelligence can one day possess something that we may rightly call an “intellect” as such – or not.

However, what we can discuss is whether, if one day artificial intelligence indeed reaches the point of having something like an intellect of its own, such intellect could be located between human intellect and divine intellect. For our experience today, we may have the impression that some programs of artificial intelligence know things in a way that we could never know, or, at the least, that it would take us a great amount of time to process the same data. This may give us the inclination to consider that such an artificial intelligence has a more perfect kind of information processing than we do and, therefore, that its “intellect” is more perfect than ours.

Nevertheless, we must highlight some aspects of such phenomenon. Firstly, in traditional metaphysics such as Wolff’s philosophy, we have a classic axiom that the perfection of a creature can never be as high as the perfection of its creator (cf. *Deutsche Metaphysik*, § 1088). Surely, such metaphysical notion concerns the relationship between human beings and God, in the traditional relationship between Creation and Creator. However, it may be applied to artificial intelligence as well. After all, because it is *artificial*, artificial intelligence comes from the *ars* of yet another kind of being, that is, the human being. It is not produced *naturally*, which is the case with human intelligence.

In the field of artificial intelligence, there are two approaches to the subject as to



whether an artificial intelligence may become an intelligence like human intelligence or not: there is a weak interpretation and a strong interpretation of artificial intelligence<sup>40</sup>. In a nutshell, the weak-AI interpretation holds that a program of artificial intelligence may never reach the point where one could say that it thinks by itself, whereas the strong-AI interpretation defends such a possibility, mainly regarding the advancements in the field and its prospects. Complementary, there is also the traditional distinction between artificial intelligence that has human intelligence as its point of reference as intelligence, and artificial intelligence that has a standard for intelligence independently from human intelligence<sup>41</sup>. Considering all these notions, as well as the fact that, in all cases, artificial intelligence was created by human beings using human intelligence, it may seem that we will never truly consider it to be more perfect than our own intellect. Not that – as we have seen – our intellect is perfect, quite the opposite; but due to the fact that we cannot have created something that is more perfect than ourselves.

Finally, we reach the final point of our consideration. Independent of whether we take – or will someday take – artificial intelligence to be a kind of intellect, and considering the fact that, already now, AI programs seem to process information in a greater amount and faster than human beings, could we try to locate artificial intelligence in the dynamics between human and divine intellect? That is, is artificial intelligence already – or will it ever be – a kind of intelligence between both kinds of intellect, perhaps more human-like or more God-like?

Our interpretation is this: artificial intelligence might, at best, be taken as a kind of intellect that is more perfect than human intellect, at least in what concerns specific criteria such as the processing of more information, and with greater velocity. However, it will always be one step behind the divine intellect, for several reasons. The first reason is that, although it can process more information than human beings, it cannot know all things existing at once. It is unlikely that, one day, it will be able to represent *all possible* things – which is the case with the divine intellect – because the whole intelligibility of all possible worlds may very well be overwhelming. It is not overwhelming for God in the metaphysical framework, because he is the source of all intelligibility.

Furthermore, from the practical and technical standpoint, to know all things would require several features, such as infinite energy to process all data from this world and from

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<sup>40</sup> On the subject, see: Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 889-900.

<sup>41</sup> On the subject, see: Russell; Norvig, 2013, p. 3-7.





all possible worlds, and such an extent of the intellect that may not be available: the *infinite* intellect. A relevant problem is that an artificial intelligence will likely be always an intellect of the finite kind. After all, if it seems controversial whether an artificial intellect may possess an intellect as a faculty, it seems to be uncontroversial that it cannot possess it as an act, as it is in the case of the divine intellect. A program of artificial intelligence does need to process data to obtain some sort of knowledge, optimistically interpreting, which might be paramount to the process of obtaining knowledge for the human intellect – and, therefore, it is equally far from divine intellect, which knows everything at once, not as a process. Thus, it could never know all things and, therefore, would never be able even to assert which of the possible worlds is the actual world in which we live. In a nutshell, it would require that artificial intelligence bridge the metaphysical gap of intelligibility that is only bridgeable from the divine stance. And such divine stance *may* be a transcendent stance – which we can never know, given that we cannot *know* God and the divine realities.

## Final remarks

As a main result of our investigation, we find two points to consider, that may help us better understand the current – and future – phenomenon of artificial intelligence. Firstly, that it is unclear whether we may consider at some point artificial intelligence to be a kind of *intellect* – be it from Wolff's definition, or from the definition of any other philosopher. Secondly, that, even if someday we take artificial intelligence to be a kind of intellect, and even if such intellect seems to be more perfect than our own – which is also debatable –, there will still be a sort of metaphysical gap between the seemingly perfect knowledge of an artificial intelligence and the most perfect intellect possible, perhaps in the likes of the divine intellect as in Wolff's approach, which served as a traditional counterpoint for our study here.



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