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PUSHING THE LIMITS OF *THEOSIS* IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EXPLORING AI COMPLEXITIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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Abstract: Current debates about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its effects cover a wide range of perspectives, including optimistic views of a better world, as well as pessimistic concerns about an uncontrollable superintelligence that will dominate humankind to our detriment. AI is also revolutionizing religion by fundamentally changing its core dimensions, facilitating worldwide interconnectedness, and allowing individuals to engage with religious teachings and rituals regardless of their physical location. Our study sets out to explore the junction of AI, ethics, and Romanian traditional religious practices and analyze how they interact and create tension between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, that is, right belief and right behavior. In addition, we seek to assess the speed at which an AI-driven society will develop and the level of opposition it will face. By taking an information-oriented rather than dogmatic perspective, the study aims to contribute insightful knowledge that can support advancement towards spiritually sustainable goals and an ethically responsible society.

Key words: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Religious thought and practice, Romanian Orthodox Church, digital technology

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1. Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally impacted all walks of human life. The provision of customized search results on the internet, the facial recognition on mobile devices as well as the increasing utilization of autonomous algorithms and autonomous driving has made AI a significant, albeit controversial, and prevailing trend nowadays. Contemporary discussions over AI and its impacts encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from visions of an improved and more equitable world to visions of an unmanageable superintelligence that subjugates humanity. However, although accurately forecasting the enduring ramifications of using AI is exceedingly challenging, nonetheless, despite the existence of many uncertainties, it has become evident that humankind still possesses the opportunity to guide the future progress of AI and establish ethical boundaries that align with humanistic principles and human rights. A lot of these questions of AI and its effect on social practices, including religious practices and ethics, turn on whether one envisions a world marked by "strong AI/general" or weak/narrow" AI applications (Trotta et al 2023).

Unexpectedly and somewhat controversially, AI is also revolutionizing religion in its core dimensions, enabling global connectivity, and allowing individuals to access religious teachings and practices regardless of their geographical location. Likewise, AI has the capability to generate virtual religious encounters and establish a more intimate and efficient connection with their devotees using AI-driven virtual assistants which can be utilized to address religious inquiries, hence facilitating a broader dissemination of religious knowledge. For all its user-friendly applications, apprehensions over the ramifications of AI in the realm of religion concern such viewpoints that AI could substitute conventional religious activities and organizations, resulting in a decline in human interaction and community, or that AI could be employed to make religious judgements and get incorporated in spiritual rituals, thereby giving rise to a wide array of ethical considerations. Furthermore, when faith is strongly embraced by large population segments, as is the case of Romanian Orthodox Christians in Romania, AI's influence becomes more complex and appears to bring along both opportunities and threats to the people's spiritual well-being, clashing with traditional values, natural human interaction, and personal freedom on the one hand, while being embraced as an innovative digital technology and benefitting people, on the other (Vidican-Manci 2024, Vinichenko et al 2020).

Against this general background, our study sets out to explore the transformative and conflicting intersection of AI, ethics, and Romanian traditional religious practices in an attempt to predict the pace of, and resistance to, an AI-driven contemporary society. To do this, we will seek to

identify and examine the potential areas of tension between the digitalization of society and the spiritual dimension within the fast-changing Romanian landscape of modern technologies and innovation. By establishing a connection between digital policymakers and spiritual communities, the study seeks to generate insightful knowledge that can facilitate progress toward spiritually sustainable objectives and a more ethically responsible society. The research method used in this study is qualitative and the approach takes a knowledge-based and information-oriented perspective rather than dogmatic. Through a literature survey of studies, blogs, and interviews, combined with observations deriving from official AI-related documents, we analyze the obtained descriptive data seeking to emphasize meaning rather than overstated generalizations.

The current paper is structured as follows: a first section (1) provides a background-setting description of AI and the emerging general concerns related to ownership, authorship, and ethics. Section 2 reviews the current understudied field of research on the impact of digitalization and AI in Romania while Section 3 looks more closely into the digital development and AI applications focusing on their impact on traditional religious practices. The conclusions (section 4) summarize the way forward toward fostering a more mindful civil society and a healthy environment.

2. Ethics, Authorship and Artificial Intelligence

AI refers to the computer's capability to carry out functions typically associated with human intelligence, including thinking, planning, problem-solving, and learning from past experiences (Wang 2019). The rapid growth and advancement of AI technologies, coupled with the ambiguity surrounding the ownership of AI-generated works, have had significant implications for intellectual property laws and policies. This has raised crucial issues regarding the ownership, authorship, value, and originality of non-human creations in the digital domain. For example, the issue of copyright law's applicability to AI-generated works has sparked controversies and two possible approaches have been suggested: either denying copyright protection to works made by computers, or attributing authorship of computer-generated works to the program designer (Guadamuz 2017). Although these two options may initially appear simple, they also prompt an examination into who should be legally recognized as the person responsible for coordinating the production of the work, as well as whether the law should recognize the contributions of the programmer or the program user. Furthermore, generative AI is primarily responsible for analyzing vast amounts of data to identify patterns, create new information, or extract significant insights through a process known as text and data mining (TDM). However, when employing AI algorithms to

produce a creative output, the user's participation in the creative process is often minimal, usually limited to activating the machine with just a single click. Presently, there is a significant hype discussion surrounding AI systems that generate content, the main issue being that these systems cannot be considered genuine creators. They are merely capable of imitating human literary and artistic expression by analyzing existing human products. Therefore, proponents claim that, as computers may imitate human creative works by acquiring patterns from a diverse array of human productions used for training, human writers should receive compensation for their role in AI advancement (Senftleben 2022, Initiative Urheberrecht 2023). Some others argue that AI should be regarded solely as a tool for accomplishing a certain objective, meaning that the responsibility for its development rests with the human programmer, user, or owner. This would finally address the challenges related to the absence of distinctiveness and the formation of the connection between humans and the end output provided by artificial intelligence (Botha 2019).

Another controversial aspect of AI concerns the ethical values and principles deriving from its great capabilities to match, perform or exceed human performance in all areas of intellectual tasks. The formidable capacity and adaptability of large language models and AI, such as ChatGPT, provide a significant obstacle to the conventional human-centered approach to composition. Furthermore, compared to previous technologies, AI relies on machine-learning techniques and has the capability to perform a wider range of cognitive tasks that require access to vast quantities of data. However, the collection of such data that poses significant issues of privacy, permission, and surveillance, the possibility of maintaining biases in data collection, the utilization of AI models constructed from biased datasets, as well as the subsequent perpetuation of systemic injustices (Walsh et al. 2019) raise additional concerns regarding the potential of AI-based work to cause harm to others. The possibility of such negative consequences may increase with the ever more extensive scope of AI deployment, thus maximizing its potential to exploit and exert influence on individuals (Susser et al 2019).

On the other hand, social responsibility agendas prioritize ethical principles and human rights responsibilities in relation to AI. They aim to promote the creation and enforcement of regulations, the interpretation of legal standards, and the provision of guidance to keep up with the rapid advancements in technology. Conceptually, ethics is not inferior to human rights, but rather a different approach that often aligns with the goal of protection in many areas. Indeed, ethical principles are formulated and organized in distinct manners and their enforcement differs from that of human rights, often not relying on coercive force or being subject to centralized authority. In other words, states that voluntarily assume human

rights commitments are legally obligated to comply with them under international law whereas states that agree to ethical obligations can only be influenced, albeit to some extent, by international pressure to act in line with their obligations. While certain states may only be required to sign human rights accords, it is evident that ethical obligations must be met by diligent efforts by states. In the emerging field of AI, there is currently a lack of harmonizing clarity on legal norms, particularly on an international level, which makes ethical rules and obligations critical in the current role they play in this context (Rodrigues 2020).

A significant framework that established the ethical AI principles is founded upon the five principles of *explicability, autonomy, justice, non-maleficence*, and *beneficence* (Floridi et al 2018, Bankins and Formosa 2023). This framework enables an examination of the extensive ramifications that AI can have on the progress and application of broader information digital technologies. One principle is *beneficence*, which pertains to the advantages that AI can contribute to the environmentally sustainable promotion of human well-being and the preservation of human dignity. Ensuring that AI does not cause injury to humanity is the very essence of *non-maleficence*; this includes protecting the privacy of individuals and ensuring the security and safety of AI systems. *Autonomy* entails granting humans the authority to determine the actions of AI. A concern that connects the first two principles is the intentional or unintentional use of AI to cause damage by violating and interfering with human autonomy. *Justice* entails distributing the benefits and burdens of AI use equitably while preserving social cohesion and solidarity. Ultimately, *explicability* pertains to the verification of AI's operations to ascertain their intelligibility and accountability, thereby facilitating comprehension of their inner workings and enabling the imposition of liability on their perpetrators. This framework is relevant because it illustrates the considerable advantages of AI in removing human bias, in analyzing extensive datasets to uncover new and valuable insights, in enhancing human capabilities to tackle intricate challenges, amplify the effectiveness of their work, and consequently provide better service to others. Likewise, this framework bears relevance to our examination of AI's impact on the traditional religious practices in Romania in what concerns mainly two of its principles, *autonomy* and *beneficence*, respectively, that we will pursue in the following sections of the study.

3. The Impact of Digitalization and AI in Romania

AI is a technology that is currently influencing the way users engage with and are influenced by the Internet. Romania has a highly advanced and competitive internet infrastructure, with the fastest fixed internet

connection speeds in the region. Moreover, recent dates show that there were 17.82 million internet users in Romania in 2023 (Statista 2024), with a household internet coverage rate of 85.7%, of which 89.8% is coverage in urban areas and 80.3% being in rural regions. Furthermore, a total of 98.6% of individuals between the ages of 16 and 34 used the internet in 2023 (Vidican-Manci 2024). All these figures are reflective of the necessary conditions that have been in place for AI advancements and applications in Romania on the one hand, and of the AI-based internet fast development on the other, facilitated by enhancing connection speed, delivering highly tailored information, augmenting the intelligence of search engines, and enhancing online security.

Public interest in the conceptualization, application and regulating AI has boomed over the past few years with the establishment of several associations (such as ARIA), national strategies – such as the *National Strategic Framework in the Field of Artificial Intelligence* and the *National Strategy for Research, Innovation and Smart Specialisation* - AI companies and startups (85 in 2024) and several MA study programs founded at several Romanian universities. Also, Romania debuted in 2023 the world's first AI government adviser, ION, built by researchers to utilize AI to efficiently, and automatically, capture Romanian citizens' thoughts and desires. Likewise, as an interdisciplinary field that integrates computer science, mathematics, and cognitive psychology, AI-related scholarly research has tackled applications across various fields and Romanian activity sectors, with important studies conducted in digital marketing (Simion and Popescu 2023), machine learning (Danca 2022), higher education (HE) and many others. AI frameworks in HE prove to be critical in addressing methods and techniques that include, but are not limited to, neural networks, probabilistic learning methods, deep learning, online educational data mining (Bucea et al. 2022, Ilic et al. 2021, Pantelimon et al. 2021), and academic performance (Simionescu et al. 2023).

In what concerns the research on AI impact on Romanian religious practices, very few studies have so far examined the double-edged nature of AI, the intersection of religious and spiritual experiences with digital technologies or the AI-impacted preferences of the Romanian digital natives. Previous studies (Dascălu 2012) concern religious communication, between living experience and forms of manifestation, interpersonal relations and the relationship between Christian churches and Religions in the Internet network area. More recent studies (Căpuşneanu et al. 2021) suggest that gaining insight into the elements that influence the acceptance and utilization of digital technologies might facilitate the development of effective strategies to achieve a sustainable digital transformation in Romanian society. Similarly, Năduleanu et al (2023) discover that the spiritual dimension has an impact on people's attitudes

towards digitalization and their perception of it. They found that AI is viewed as a controversial technology from a theological standpoint, being seen as invasive and potentially alienating for humanity, similar to other technologies. In Vidican-Manci's (2020) book, the focus rests on the Orthodox Church's fascination with the influence of modern technologies and the volume examines how the virtual agora, a representation of postmodern society, plays a significant role in the cultural and religious aspects of spirituality. In Vidican-Manci's view, the Orthodox Church finds it necessary to embrace new technologies as a way to modernization. A more recent analysis of the attitudes of Romanian adolescents towards prayer and the utilization of AI-assisted technologies indicates that young individuals have a preference for unrestricted prayer, moderate reliance on prayer books, and a certain lack of awareness of the potential benefits of AI in educational settings. Nevertheless, they are receptive to future proposals from the Romanian Orthodox Church, which may include the utilization of AI-assisted technologies (Vidican-Manci 2024).

Albeit understudied, such interdisciplinary areas continue to spark interest as AI advancement and the ramifications of using AI are becoming exceedingly challenging. The next section explores the impact of digital development and AI on Romanian traditional religious practices.

4. The Impact of Digital Development and AI on Romanian Traditional Religious Practices

The influence of AI in Romania extends beyond personal beliefs and behaviors changing religious communities and social interactions in what concerns Romanian orthodox collective identity and hierarchical structures as well as power allocation of religious authority within religious institutions. Romanians rank as the most devout nationality within the European Union. Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the prevailing religion in Romania, with over 85% of believers reported in the most recent census published in 2023 (Statista 2024). The Orthodox Churches are distinguished by their elaborate worship and rituals, with a particular emphasis on the Holy Mass, the practice of heartfelt prayer, and prayer in general. According to a statistical survey conducted by the Romanian Academy and the governmental Secretariat for Religious Affairs, 89.8% of Romanians believe in God, 53.9% pray regularly and 62.4% have the highest level of faith in the Church compared to other governmental organizations (Barometrul Vietii Religioase 2021). The strength of the Orthodox Church is deemed to lie in the fact that Orthodox Christians consistently demonstrate obedience and faithful service in all that they undertake. This is what empowers them to live a life commensurate with the gospel of Christ: to steadfastly stand and cooperatively endeavour for the faith of

the gospel. To this purpose, the practice of worship and collective assemblies carries a profound importance for the religious Romanian communities, hence the tangible existence of persons, their mutual encounters, and the combined vitality produced in the Romanian society remain priceless. Consequently, while technological progress has made it possible to create virtual or augmented reality experiences, these AI-based developments have hardly seemed able to completely recreate the genuine feeling of community and sanctity that comes from being physically present together (Năduleanu et al. 2023).

Moreover, with the utilization of AI in information dissemination and social media algorithms, profound ramifications for interfaith discussion and online religious communities have surfaced (Amegbeha 2023) and the intricate relationship between technology, religion, and culture has shown that, despite its extraordinary powers, AI is incapable of replacing human presence in religious and cultural settings. As early as the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for digital technologies that could be used in isolation at home has allowed, in Romania and elsewhere, for the significant increase of online platforms such as forums or groups dedicated to discussing scripture, the use of religious memes aimed at fostering a sense of community, the increase of blogging as a means of religious observance and even of some attempts to try online rituals to reinforce religion, and applications and social media for teaching and worship purposes. Thus, the cellphone and the computer have become the essential elements of any structure, so deeply integrated and entangled in numerous critical substructures that their removal would result in severe damage to the entire structure. The development of such new types of interdependencies and technological dependencies results in religious groups becoming entangled in certain platforms, cloud computing services, data storage, and analytics systems. Clearly, the convergence of offline and online religious realms will vary based on the particular faith and the wider cultural setting in which it is situated. While many religions, such as Mormonism, excel at leveraging the opportunities presented by digital technologies, other religions will find that digital technologies offer a platform for their followers to question or even reject certain components of their faith. This space is utilized in an innovative manner by those who may have reservations about questioning their religion in the physical world due to a variety of factors (Brien 2020). Finally, there is an almost unanimous perception of a significant threat arising from AI in both individual and collective domains. In a study on the impact of AI on the advancement of human potential as perceived by the Orthodox clergy and their followers (Vinichenko et al 2020), Orthodox respondents generally saw AI as a detrimental force in the realm of human life safety. The growing integration of AI into human life is causing anxiety arising from the

ambiguity surrounding the creators and controllers of AI, as well as the intentions behind its employment. Control systems, initially designed to ensure human security and societal well-being, can occasionally be compromised and exploited by malicious individuals or organizations and lack of information security causes concern within society and diminishes the level of confidence in those responsible for developing and utilizing AI technology. The Orthodox clergy and parishioners are especially concerned about the unpredictability associated with the development and utilization of AI. Furthermore, the study found that, generally, Orthodox churched members are also deeply concerned about the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequality resulting from the integration of AI into society. Their ethical stance and life objectives are focused on spiritual growth rather than the accumulation of financial riches. This partially hinders the rapid progress of their growth in the digital information realm, their ability to compete in the market, and has the potential to exacerbate social disparities.

In what follows, an exploration of the impact of digital development and AI on Romanian traditional religious practices will bring to the fore the main directions of association or disentanglements of Romanian Orthodox Religious Practices with AI-driven digital technology.

AI will begin generating icons and this will clash with traditional Orthodox theology. Iconography is the result of human prayer and artistic skill, being a manifestation of God's transcendental presence in an immanent physical form. Therefore, only a human who is physically embodied and possesses divine grace may produce an authentic icon. Furthermore, the creation of sacred art necessitates the involvement of a human being who possesses knowledge in theology and Christian symbolism. While a machine with a computer algorithm has the capability to produce the image of such an object, it nonetheless lacks the likeness of holy, embodied 'art', which necessitates the involvement of human hands, imagination, sacrifice, and love. There are serious present-day concerns regarding the varieties of machine-learning technology (deep-fakes) being used not only in dehumanizing ways but also in ways that alter the canonical figures in desecrating, mocking ways (cf. Rojas n.d.; Mooneyhan 2016).

A related issue is that *AI will create compelling and inspiring content as text generator of engaging religious content.* Although incorporating AI-generated insights to create spiritual reflections for blogs or websites and to enhance group religious education materials aligns with the modernized use of digital technologies, the production of captivating devotionals to inspire and uplift churchgoers is currently non-beneficial and non-feasible. Typically, Orthodox Mass speeches and services take place in churches, and afterwards, the religious community engages in thought-provoking

debates. Currently, it is improbable for scripture-based content to be generated and shared at home among online religious communities as a substitute for conventional church attendance. This is because attending church is an integral part of Orthodox spirituality, and without engaging in this practice one is not regarded as a devout Orthodox follower. (This is a major theological difference between evangelical Protestantism and Orthodoxy, cf. Truglia 2017) Consequently, the implications of automation in the new advancements in AI have everything to do with the ways in which Orthodox religious practice groups and leaders shape their relationships to either encourage or limit specific aspects of human-machine connection in established Orthodox practices and everyday tasks. Even if numerous religious rituals and practices can be technically automated, in what concerns Romanians and their faith, the decision to automate and endorse specific traditions with legitimacy ultimately rests with the Orthodox Romanian Church. On the other hand, certain individuals attend church primarily for the purpose of forming relationships rather than engaging in worship. And while some may argue that the allure of AI providing pseudo-companionship will encourage certain individuals to stray, leading to a decrease in the level of congregational participation, others may tend to maintain the millennial traditional practices to which the array of modern AI-based technological dependencies, platforms, cloud computing services, data storage, and analytics systems have stayed so far completely alien (cf. Trotta, et al., 2023).

AI will facilitate the extensive use of digital chat bots and the tendency is that with time, advisors, priests, and spiritual monks will be slowly replaced by digital chat bots. Why bother going to a priest when you have the option of engaging in conversation with an AI that seems to know everything? The AI will thus have the capability to produce persuasive responses because it will immediately access information from a database containing scripture and writings from the Holy Church Fathers. Additionally, it will own a substantial amount of personal data pertaining to the user, enabling it to provide answers that appear to be tailored specifically to the individual's needs, profile, and mind. However, among AI's most notable deficiencies is the absence of wisdom in imparting advice and the missing interpersonal interaction that occurs between two individuals in so doing — a phenomenon that greatly nourishes the human spirit. A balanced, sound spiritual orthopraxy and collective memory are transmitted intergenerationally through tradition, being nothing close to a simple process of duplicating and pasting experiences. Nonetheless, Romanians who have encountered famous saintly monks have often confirmed the presence of life-giving grace that radiates from them and, we hold, for all the ease of access and user-friendly approach of AI gadgets, they are more likely to embrace the real experience over the

most accessible one. Contrariwise, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown that isolation imposing circumstances are apt to strengthen the belief system that prioritizes individualism rather than a social worldview (Campbell 2023). Nonetheless, the level of religious engagement during COVID-19 and its impact on individual and collective religious affiliation, as well as the potential long-term effects of isolation on the Romanian dominant religious denomination, are still uncertain.

AI will provide an inexpensive alternative to achieving enlightenment, but it will also continuously entice religious people to remain dependent on technology and let go of their critical thinking skills. Relying unquestioningly on the assertions of a generative AI as absolute truth, or treating it as infallible, are likely to result in a truly catastrophic period for the dissemination of accurate information, integrity, and human capacity to trust any visual or auditory evidence. Generative AI has the capacity to serve as an additional barrier separating reality from perceptions, thereby constructing a virtual realm of simulations wherein people are all confined, regardless of whether they have willingly embraced the latest virtual reality technology or not. A recent survey conducted in Romania shows that 40 percent of respondents did not agree that AI would become as intelligent as man (Statista 2024). However, 85 percent believed that the decisions of AI must be thoroughly explained so that they can be trusted. Consequently, it has become more and more evident that, instead of assuming that AI, being a machine, possesses the same level of rationality and logic as portrayed in many science fiction works (Singler 2023), it is imperative that all information be carefully scrutinized.

AI will cultivate a secular, pervasive sense of devotion that is intrinsic to, propelling, and molding the process of digitalization. The process of digitalization takes on religious characteristics, functioning as a system that assigns value and importance to individuals and society. It is gradually shaping people's perception of reality through various algorithmic selection applications, influencing their worldview and social structure. The religious dimension of digitalization in Romania is evolving independently, although interconnected or in rivalry with, established Orthodox religion and traditional religious practices, propelled by the merging of technology and religion in what looks like a fading of distinctions. Within this particular framework, advancements in technology are currently being promoted as a form of spiritual salvation from the constraints, limits, and negative aspects of human existence. Humans are thus getting the ability to get qualities that were once only associated with God: omniscience (continuous monitoring of data), omnipresence (ubiquitous available digital technology) and omnipotence (creation of non-biological intelligence). Process-wise, this transforming digitalized salvation exhibits the qualities of an *implicit religion* (Bailey 2002) in the sense that there is a significant presence of

religiosity during the process of digitization, however the individuals involved do not personally see it as religious. This might be ascribed to the unconventional character of religiosity, which particularly in certain aspects, bears a striking resemblance to religion (Latzer 2022). Nonetheless, the contemporary AI-influenced and routinized implicit religion is altering individuals' perception and comprehension of reality in ways that will be ultimately affecting existing religious practices.

5. Conclusions

The objective of our study was to explore, from an information-oriented, not dogmatic perspective, the intersection of AI, ethics, and Romanian religious traditions, and to evaluate the dynamics of their interaction and the potential resulting tensions. Furthermore, a side objective has been to assess the rate at which an AI-driven society would progress and the degree of resistance it will encounter. The study confirms the fact that the influence of AI in Romania extends beyond personal beliefs and behaviors and that it is affecting to a certain extent Romanian religious communities and social interactions. The use of AI-assisted technologies facilitates an unrestricted personal religious space and confidence that surpasses humans and gives way to a comfort zone where all criticism, uncertainties, and uncertainties tend to diminish. The perception of this zone varies across communities and individuals, being largely premised on the false idea that religion belongs to the past, and modernity would be somewhat opposed to it. The assertion is contradicted by the facts, as religion is not only cultural heritage, but it was also the very source of modernity. And while young individuals are more eager to embrace AI gadgets and digitally more advanced technologies in their personal space, others perceive the "othering" of technology as a disconnecting distance between the technology and the very religious traditions that they protect against this threat. Much in line with previous studies (Vidican-Manci 2024), we hold that the Romanian Orthodox community are still at the stage at which it perceives its connection with modern technologies as a means of bridging rather than of mixing or blurring old traditional faith. For now, cyberspace and the fast-developing AI technology are only intangible, boundless, and indeterminate realms that are produced by humans and are subject to continuous transformation by them, thereby encompassing both extensions and inconsistencies of most human actions.

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