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“Should we believe in artificial intelligence?”

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The topic was the focus of a panel discussion organized at Fondazione Bruno Kessler at the conclusion of the REBE research project on January 21

To better understand how people today are experiencing the spread of artificial intelligence, Fondazione Bruno Kessler’s Center for Religious Studies (FBK-ISR) organized the panel discussion “Should We Believe in Artificial Intelligence?”.

The meeting, which was held in the Aula Grande Hall of the FBK main offices on Via S. Croce, was also the concluding event of the REBE – Resilient Beliefs and Beyond research project, conducted by FBK-ISR between 2022 and 2024, in **collaboration with the University of Innsbruck and the Studio Accademico Teologico in Brixen, and funding from the Euregio Science Fund**.

Drawing on an activity carried out as part of the project with two classes from the **Artigianelli Institute in Trento**, the three FBK-ISR researchers involved in the investigation, **Paolo Costa**, **Eugenia Lancellotta** **and** **Boris Rähme**, talked with **Michela Milano**, director of the FBK Center for Digital Society, and **Paolo Traverso**, director of FBK Strategic Planning, about the strong beliefs revolving around the AI revolution, their relationship to empirical evidence and how these beliefs might influence its development in the near future.

“We first asked the students,” explained Paolo Costa, ”what they think intelligence is and what characteristics artificial intelligence has. *They told us that, for them. intelligence is being able to solve problems with their own heads, adapting to different situations, but it is also distinguishing right from wrong and taking a point of view on the world. Intelligence has to do with creativity and is something that inspires admiration. According to them, however, intelligent machines have no inner life, no cognition, and do not distinguish right from wrong.”*

“I very much agree with the students,” stressed Paolo Traverso, ”Artificial intelligence, even if it amazes us, is different from ours and we must always keep this in mind. *The power that artificial intelligence has should be used for good, to do very useful things for people, always keeping in mind that we are talking about a machine that has no cognition.”*

“Since 1956, when AI was created,” Michela Milano confirmed, ”the aim has not been to reconstruct human intelligence but to mimic its characteristics: the ability to reason, plan, learn, perceive the world around us and interact with it. *Artificial intelligence can act as a support for decisions when they need to be based on evidence and on criteria that are as objective as possible.”*

Eugenia Lancellotta spoke about the risks identified by the students, related to the creative aspect of artificial intelligence, which could compete with our own, and the fact that, because of our laziness, we could leave everything up to machines to decide.

“AI,” Michela Milano explained, ”scares us because there is a fear that it will replace not only physical work, as other technologies have done, but also creative work. *In recent years, generative AI has, in fact, achieved the ability to reproduce text, music, images, videos that are completely realistic but not real. However, generative AI is often criticized as it is not really creative but imitates human creativity. I think AI has a lot of potential for collaboration with the artist. Artifacts can be created that neither a human being alone nor a machine alone can make, but they are the result of collaboration. Then there is the issue of de-empowering the expert, of letting the machine decide everything. But if we are able to always keep the human being in control in the various processes, we can take advantage of what are the positive sides of machines.” “In health,” Paolo Traverso made an example, ”in a few milliseconds, the machine is able to detect from a medical image if there is a retinopathy, and this is a huge advantage because it is as if doctors were offered tireless eyes to support them.”*

Boris Rähme then brought up other issues related to AI such as regulation and economic and geopolitical aspects.

“Right now,” noted Paolo Traverso, ”AI is in the hands of a few big players. *Europe can play a role through regulation, but this should not hold back development. The role of Research Centers can be to develop smaller, less energy-intensive systems that perform very specific tasks better.”*

“It is important,” concluded Michela Milano, ”that AI should be regulated. *At FBK, we are starting with an initiative to understand whether AI systems are in line with the European AI Act. AI can be used to make public administration more person-centered, the healthcare system more equitable, aspects that Big Tech is generally not concerned with but that are crucial to our society. In general, the person must always*

be at the center of design."

The EUREGIO Fund for Science's REBE research project, which started in May 2022 and ended in December 2024, was supervised by Christoph Amor (Brixen), Paolo Costa (Trento), Katherine Dormandy (Innsbruck), Martin Lintner (Brixen), Winfried Löffler (Innsbruck), and Boris Rähme (Trento) and led by three postdoctoral researchers, Scott Hill (Innsbruck), Gloria Dell'Eva (Brixen), and Eugenia Lancellotta (Trento), who won highly competitive calls.

The three groups had complementary research focuses. The **Innsbruck** group dealt with epistemological issues concerning the resilient aspects of worldviews and their epistemic justification. The **Trento** group focused on empirical and religious aspects of resilience and belief disagreement. The focus in **Bressanone/Brixen** was the nature of religious beliefs and the pull of Christianity outside its boundaries.

Among the goals of the REBE project was the creation of a series of activities and teaching materials for high school students. To this end, thanks to the collaboration of **FBK Junior**, Paolo Costa and Eugenia Lancellotta carried out some teaching activities in two classes at the Istituto Pavoniano Artigianelli in Trento, under the supervision of Professor Giada Saltori.

The activity consisted of six meetings in which the idea of "resilient beliefs" was first presented and discussed, and then students were asked to explicate their own and put them to the test based on two case studies. The first is the artificial intelligence revolution. The second is how social media has changed people's sociality in the past two decades.

The goal was to raise students' awareness of the different sources of their strongest beliefs.

left>right: Boris Rähme, Eugenia Lancellotta, Paolo Costa, Michela Milano, Paolo Traverso

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