

Can AI Serve as a Mentor? Embodiment and Testimonial Authority in the Age of Algorithms

DARIUSZ IWAŃSKI

Faculty of Theology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

nagid@umk.pl

ORCID: 0000-0001-5444-3219

Abstract. Some students in higher education turn to AI for mentoring support. Yet whether AI can genuinely serve as a mentor has received little scholarly attention. The existing research on AI in education has largely concentrated on instrumental effectiveness, with ethical concerns drawing considerably less scrutiny. An ontological analysis, however, remains absent altogether: can AI fulfill the fundamental conditions of mentoring in the first place? We argue that AI encounters two fundamental ontological limitations as a mentor. Drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Pauline body theology, and Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony, we argue: first, the absence of embodied co-presence precludes the intercorporeality essential for the transmission of tacit knowledge; second, the absence of an existential biography eliminates testimonial authority, which requires a readiness for vouching with one's own being. Despite these limitations, students can perceptually interpret AI as a mentor. Drawing on Gibson's concept of affordances and the Perceptual Bias Activation framework (Lee and Esposito 2025), we argue that AI generates false affordances. Constant availability can be misread as relational presence. Emotionless tone can be mistaken for impartial judgment. Adaptive responses can be perceived as genuine understanding. Our analysis reveals that AI produces a simulacrum of mentoring, not a technologically mediated relationship, but its simulation. For academic practice, this implies that universities should position AI as a knowledge assistant rather than a mentor substitute, in order to safeguard the formative dimension of higher education.

Keywords: mentoring, artificial intelligence, embodiment, testimonial authority, tacit knowledge, Pauline theology.

Contribution. The author is responsible for all aspects of this work, including conceptualization, methodology, writing, and review. This article offers three contributions to the scholarship on AI in higher education. First, it reframes the question of AI mentoring. It moves from effectiveness and ethics toward ontology, asking whether AI can fulfill the constitutive conditions of a mentoring relationship at all. Second, it develops an interdisciplinary framework. This framework draws on the phenomenology of intercorporeality, Pauline soma theology, and Ricoeur's hermeneutics of testimony. Together these identify two such conditions: embodied co-presence and testimonial authority. Third, it introduces the concept of false affordances. This concept helps explain why students can perceive AI as a mentor despite the ontological deficit the analysis describes.

Use of AI. Artificial intelligence tools were used as auxiliary support in literature searching, language editing, and formatting. All conceptual, theoretical, and argumentative aspects of the work are the author's sole intellectual contribution. AI served as a technical assistant, not an intellectual co-author.

Introduction

The interdisciplinary discourse on artificial intelligence in higher education (AIED) has developed along two lines. The first concentrates on the instrumental effectiveness of personalization algorithms in optimizing learning processes. The second examines ethical concerns: algorithmic bias, data privacy, and student autonomy (Köbis and Mehner 2021, 2). The first line, however, clearly predominates. In their review of 146 studies on AI applications in higher education from 2007 to 2018, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019, 9) found that only two articles addressed ethical implications—a proportion they described as “stunningly low.”

Neither the instrumental nor the ethical line of inquiry asks about the fundamental ontological conditions of educational relationships. Bearman et al. (2023, 380) observe that AI is frequently perceived as a “ghost in the machine”—an invisible, technical component—which impedes discussion of its social and relational consequences. Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019, 21) further show that the field is dominated by

computer science and STEM, resulting in “weak connection to theoretical pedagogical perspectives.” In the context of mentoring, this leads to a problematic oversimplification.

Szutta (2025, 2) argues that existing AI models concentrate on rational aspects, “neglecting the emotional nature of moral perception and the role of transformative experiences” essential to authentic mentoring. Oviedo (2022, 938) observes that even theological reflection on AI too readily confines itself to ethical questions, when what matters are the “anthropological consequences of current technological advances”—consequences that elude purely ethical or instrumental analysis.

Mentoring represents a distinctive case that exposes this gap. In their review of 106 empirical studies on student mentoring, Nuis et al. (2023, 12) demonstrate that effective mentoring requires five main types of support, the most fundamental of which are “emotional, psychosocial, psychological, and academic.” Köbis and Mehner (2021, 1) emphasize that mentoring demands “one of the highest degrees of trust, openness, and social–emotional support”—more than any other form of education. This makes mentoring the most revealing test case for the relational limitations of technology. Yet neither systematic reviews of AI effectiveness (Neumann et al. 2021), nor studies of technology acceptance (Lee and Esposito 2025), nor proposals for ChatGPT in doctoral supervision (Iatrellis et al. 2025) ask the fundamental question: can AI fulfill the ontological conditions of such a relationship in the first place?

The literature defines the empirical requirements of mentoring—trust, empathy, support—yet it does not address the transcendental question: what are the conditions of possibility for these requirements? What makes it possible for trust, empathy, and the transmission of wisdom to arise between mentor and student in the first place? This question reaches beyond matters of effectiveness (does AI work?) and ethics (should AI be used?), pointing toward ontology: can AI—in the sense of ontological, not technological, possibility—serve as a mentor?

This article proposes an interdisciplinary theoretical analysis of the problem, bringing together philosophy and theology. We draw on four main theoretical frameworks. First, the theory of embodied cognition (Polanyi 1966; Hopsicker 2009) demonstrates that the transmission

of skills rests on tacit knowledge rooted in the body. Second, the phenomenology of intercorporeality (Fuchs 2016; Merleau-Ponty 2012) shows that authentic empathy requires intercorporeal resonance. Third, the hermeneutics of testimony (Ricoeur 1980) establishes that authority demands existential engagement and biographical credibility. Fourth, Pauline soma theology (Gundry 1976; Dunn 1998; Ferguson 2020) converges with phenomenology, revealing that the body is the locus of relational presence and transformation.

If, as our framework proposes, these four frameworks are ontologically indispensable to mentoring, then replacing the human mentor with AI constitutes a category mistake, not a technological or ethical issue. The analysis does not rest on empirical data from original research, but on a critical synthesis of existing theoretical and philosophical literature. It advances the thesis that authentic mentoring requires two ontological conditions that AI cannot fulfill. First, it requires embodied co-presence, which enables the transmission of tacit knowledge through intercorporeal resonance. Second, it requires an authority rooted in the mentor's biographical engagement: testimonial authority (*martyria*). AI, devoid of soma, resembles the biblical status of pagan idols, "lifeless matter" (van Kooten 2008, 4) incapable of representing a living presence. Empirical studies cited in this article serve an illustrative, not a foundational role. They confirm that the phenomena described are observable. The ontological argument itself does not depend on them. The stakes of this analysis reach beyond pedagogical concerns. They bear on the future of the university as a formative institution. If mentoring is reduced to information transfer, universities risk forfeiting their transformative dimension.

The article is structured in three parts. Part one analyzes the ontological conditions of mentoring from the perspective of phenomenology and epistemology. Part two examines the mechanisms through which AI produces a simulacrum of mentoring. Part three offers a conclusion that positions AI as a knowledge assistant rather than a mentor substitute.

1. The Ontological Conditions of Mentoring

To substantiate the thesis that AI cannot serve as a mentor, we must first establish which conditions are constitutive of an authentic mentoring relationship. We analyze two dimensions: embodied co-presence and testimonial authority.

1.1. Embodied Co-Presence

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology marks a breakthrough in thinking about the body (Dreyfus 1996). The Cartesian tradition treated the body as *res extensa*, an external object, accessible to observation from a distance. Merleau-Ponty rejects this perspective by introducing the concept of *corps propre*: the body is not an object that I possess, but my primordial access to the world. "The body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147).

What does *corps propre* entail, and why does it matter for mentoring? Maciejczak (2001) emphasizes that this shift in perspective is fundamental. The body is not an instrument that the self employs. It is rather the medium through which I realize my engagement with the world: walking, writing, perceiving. If the structure of the *corps propre* determines one's access to the world, then the transmission of wisdom presupposes bodily co-presence, a direct resonance of experience.

Maciejczak (2001) clarifies that *corps propre* does not simply mean that the body belongs to someone by virtue of being united with a conscious subject. Rather, the structures described are proper to the body itself, structural moments of its essence. Merleau-Ponty also calls this the phenomenal body. It actively constitutes the world through pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic knowledge. Consider a concrete example: when I learn to play a musical instrument, the skill is fully acquired only when it integrates into the body's motor capacities. The intentional body grasps a certain physiognomy of movement. I do not consciously establish the successive phases of my hand's motion; awareness of such movement is non-thematic. Experience precedes reflection. This bodily knowledge is accessible through the body's own effort and cannot be reached by

intellectual reflection alone. This is precisely why a physically present mentor can transmit a skill that AI, within the adopted ontology, cannot embody.

The transmission of wisdom, which is essential to mentoring, requires bodily co-presence. It operates through what Michael Polanyi (1966) terms tacit knowledge. “We can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi 1966, 4). This knowledge cannot be fully articulated because it is rooted in the body (Ray 2009). Zmyślony (2012), drawing on Collins’s (2010) taxonomy, identifies somatic tacit knowledge as knowledge inseparable from the body, expressed essentially in habitual action. It cannot be acquired from linguistic information alone but only through personal practice.

Here a pivotal concept emerges: Thomas Fuchs’s intercorporeality—intercorporeal resonance. Although Merleau-Ponty analyzed intersubjectivity and the shared world, it was Fuchs (2016) who developed these intuitions into a precise conception of intercorporeality as a condition of interpersonal communication. Fuchs demonstrates that emotions, experiences, and even skills are transmitted through direct bodily contact. Mentor and student do not merely exchange information—they resonate with each other at the somatic level. This is what AI, devoid of a body, cannot achieve within the phenomenological framework outlined here. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (Antiqua et Nova, 2025, par. 31) underscores that human intelligence develops organically through bodily experience: “Human intelligence develops organically throughout the person’s physical and psychological growth, shaped by a myriad of lived experiences in the flesh”. AI, lacking this embodied development and relying solely on mathematical computation, cannot participate in this process of somatic resonance.

It is worth considering a postphenomenological objection. Ihde (2009, 42) argues that technology can become a “transparent” extension of the body—what he calls an embodiment relation. If so, does AI, when used naturally and routinely by a student, not become part of the student’s *corps propre*—much like a cane for a blind person? Answering this requires distinguishing between two types of relation with technology. According to Ihde, when body and tool function as a single perceptual unity (I–cane → world), the tool becomes quasi-transparent. Intercorporeality

as Fuchs (2016, 196) understands it, however, demands something more. An extended body is not sufficient. What is needed are two living bodies capable of mutual affective resonance. Merleau-Ponty (2012, 411–412) speaks of “the body of the other” and shared participation in the world. Fuchs (2016, 195, 203), in turn, develops this into a conception of biological vitality in intercorporeal interaction. The postphenomenological objection therefore conflates two fundamentally distinct relations: the extension of perception through a tool and the encounter with another embodied subject.

AI as a tool may extend the student’s perception (extended mind), but it does not generate a second center of experience with which intercorporeality, in Fuchs’s sense, becomes possible. The difference is fundamental. A cane extends my body toward the world, but it does not create a second You that responds to me from its own embodied center. Even if AI is “transparent” as a cognitive tool, it remains ontologically incapable of the intercorporeal exchange that characterizes the mentor-student relationship.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, authentic mentoring may require three elements: embodiment (the body as the subject of experience), tacit knowledge (rooted in the body), and intercorporeal resonance (intercorporeality). These three elements are ontologically interlinked—they cannot be separated without losing the essence of mentoring. AI, devoid of a body and the capacity for resonance, can offer information, but—within this analysis—cannot serve as an authentic mentor. Yet embodied co-presence is not the only ontological condition at stake. Even if AI could somehow simulate bodily presence, it would still lack what we turn to next: testimonial authority rooted in existential engagement.

1.2. Testimonial Authority

Testimony is not a mere transmission of information. Paul Ricoeur (1980, 124) defines it as a “dual relation: there is the one who testifies and the one who hears the testimony.” The witness has seen, but the listener has not. This asymmetry is fundamental. Ricoeur (1980, 140–143) identifies

three dialectical moments of testimony. The first is the “dialectic of meaning and event”—the witness has genuinely lived through something significant. The second is the process of adjudicating credibility—testimony is subject to evaluation, requiring a choice between a false and a faithful witness. The third is the dialectic of the witness and the things seen—testimony is not merely a report, but an engagement that in its most radical form becomes martyrdom (*martyria*).

Lythgoe (2011, 5), systematizing Ricoeur’s thought, introduces an analytical distinction between factual testimony and the testimony of conscience or of sense. The former concerns external, verifiable facts and requires only presence at the event. The latter presupposes an internal, moral dimension grounded in the identity, convictions, and character of the witness. As Lythgoe emphasizes, in the testimony of sense “deceit does not allude to the lack of accuracy of the statement, but to an unfaithfulness to convictions” (2011, 5).

A crucial implication for AI follows from this analysis. A witness must possess continuity of consciousness, a history that enables the reiteration of a declaration, and the capacity for promise—for taking responsibility for the truth of what is said. Narrative identity is therefore a necessary condition of the testimony of sense. AI can deliver factual testimony, but—within our framework—it is structurally devoid of all the conditions required for the testimony of sense. Szutta (2025, 2) supports this argument, noting that AI models neglect “the emotional nature of moral perception and the role of transformative experiences.” This precludes them from being authentic witnesses.

Pauline soma theology reinforces this hermeneutics of testimony by revealing the theological foundations of authority rooted in bodily existence. Gundry (1976, 187) interprets soma as physical substance—a condition of being in the world; without soma, “man’s way of being in the world ceases.” This is not an abstract claim. Paul himself declares: “Christ will be honored in my body [*en tō sōmati mou*], whether by life or by death” (Phil 1:20). Gundry (1976, 196) explicitly connects this passage with Christian witness and martyrdom, demonstrating that soma is the very locus where testimony acquires its existential weight. Dunn (1998, 56–57) sees in soma an embodied medium through which the individual and the

world interact reciprocally, enabling a “multidimensional collaboration of persons.” Recent Pauline scholarship reinforces the existential dimension of this theology. Walczak (2023) emphasizes that Paul must be read within his original existential context, not through the prism of later theological disputes.

Van Kooten (2008, 2, 4, 32) shows that for Paul, the Image of God is not a static property. It is a site where God manifests his presence. The human being is a „living image,” in contrast to pagan idols as „lifeless matter.” The analogy is structural, not evaluative: it concerns the absence of relational interiority, not a judgment on the technological value of AI. As we argue, these theological perspectives converge with phenomenological intercorporeality: the body is the locus where the person participates in relationship and exists for-others.

The relationality of the body has crucial implications for testimonial authority. McMyler (2011) develops Ricoeur’s intuition: the authority of the witness derives from credibility: from the fact that the witness vouches with his own life for the truth of what he says. The witness is not a neutral observer, but a person engaged existentially. It is precisely this engagement, this existential stake, that makes testimony credible. AI, devoid of experience and existential risk, cannot—within the ontology adopted here—be a witness.

The mentor, in the traditional sense, is precisely such a witness. The mentor does not come to the student with a book or an algorithm, but with lived experience. Grzywacz (2020) emphasizes that the mentor’s authority stems from being a “witness of convictions”; the mentor’s words are anchored in real choices and their consequences. As we have shown, Pauline soma theology reveals the person in relational, bodily concreteness. The mentor is not an abstract source of information, but a concrete human being whose embodied history and biographical engagement make him credible. This is the dimension that AI—within the ontology we have adopted—cannot attain.

The ontological conditions of authentic mentoring are therefore clear. The first dimension—embodied co-presence—enables the transmission of tacit knowledge and intercorporeal resonance. The second dimension—testimony and authority—renders this transmission credible

and transformative. The mentor is not a carrier of information, but a biographically engaged witness. These two dimensions are inseparably linked: authentic mentoring requires both embodiment and testimony. AI, devoid of both, cannot—in light of the ontological analysis presented here—serve as an authentic mentor.

The ontological analysis does not, however, account for a key phenomenon. Empirical data indicate that most students use AI for technical rather than relational tasks (Freeman 2025). Yet some experience their interaction with AI chatbots as a form of mentoring support. How is this possible? The answer lies in what we term “the illusion of AI mentoring.” ChatGPT and similar systems produce an appearance of fulfilling the conditions of authentic mentoring, despite their ontological deficit. How does this mechanism operate, and why is it convincing to some students?

2. The Illusion of AI Mentoring

How is it possible that AI produces an illusion of mentoring despite its ontological deficit? To answer this, we must unpack what we have termed the simulacrum of mentoring. Although the empirical studies cited here focus on ChatGPT, the ontological analysis applies to all generative AI systems, as they share the same disembodied architecture. Two theoretical frameworks are needed. Jean Baudrillard (1994, 2) describes simulacrum as “substituting the signs of the real for the real.” In its final phase, simulacrum “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1994, 6). What matters for our analysis is that simulation “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1994, 3). This dynamic is directly observable in students’ misattribution of mentoring qualities to AI. James Gibson (1979) provides the complementary framework. He shows that the environment offers us affordances, perceived as possibilities for action. Crucially, an affordance “points both ways, to the environment and to the observer” (Gibson 1979, 129), linking objective properties with the subject’s perception.

Together, these two frameworks make it possible to understand how AI produces a simulacrum of mentoring. It does so by offering what we call false affordances: perceived possibilities of mentorship that lack the ontological foundation established in Section 1. Gibson (1979, 142) describes “misinformation for affordances,” giving the example of “mistaking a closed glass door for an open doorway.” By analogy, AI can falsely suggest the possibility of a mentoring relationship that it is ontologically unable to sustain. Three key dimensions of this illusion emerge from empirical research (Lee and Esposito 2025; Freeman 2025) as the features of AI that most effectively simulate the conditions of mentoring identified in Section 1: availability, objectivity, and personalization.

This mechanism finds empirical confirmation in research on the perception of information sources. Lee and Esposito (2025, 15) demonstrate that students use emotional tone as a heuristic: “warm, empathetic messages were automatically attributed to humans,” even when they were in fact generated by ChatGPT. This misattribution reveals the simulacrum at work. Lee and Esposito (2025, 21) term this mechanism Perceptual Bias Activation: perceived identity acts as an early cognitive lens that conditions interpretation before any substantive evaluation of content takes place. AI does not need to claim to be a mentor. It suffices that it produces emotional affordances that students perceptually associate with mentoring care. The first dimension of this illusion, availability, operates through immediacy that is mistakenly perceived as presence.

2.1. Availability

The first dimension of the illusion operates through instant availability, which is mistakenly perceived as authentic presence. Unlike human mentors, whose availability is constrained by time and institutional obligations, AI chatbots offer constant availability and immediate responsiveness (Iatrellis et al. 2025). Students turn to AI particularly when access to a mentor is limited (Nguyen and Barbieri 2025) or when they need support outside traditional consultation hours (Freeman 2025).

This false affordance exploits the perceptual bias identified by Lee and Esposito (2025, 21): the immediate accessibility of AI triggers a rapid, pre-reflective response in which technical availability is read as relational presence. AI, by being perpetually “at hand,” produces an impression of being-for-the-student that resembles the relational availability of a mentor.

Yet the difference is fundamental. The mentor’s availability is limited, but when present, the mentor offers embodied co-presence that enables “affective resonance between two living bodies” (Fuchs 2016, 196). As the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (2025, par. 79) underscores, “The physical presence of a teacher creates a relational dynamic that AI cannot replicate.” AI offers unlimited informational availability, but one devoid of the ontological foundation of presence established in Section 1. This mechanism leads students to perceive immediacy as a substitute for presence, without recognizing the ontological deficit.

2.2. Objectivity

The second dimension of the illusion operates through apparent objectivity. AI employs an emotionless tone and “scientific” language; it does not judge, criticize, or express disappointment. Students perceive AI as “emotionless because it could make decisions without any prejudice or bias” (Fu and Weng 2024, 348). This dimension functions by conflating a lack of judgment with wisdom. Within the Perceptual Bias Activation framework (Lee and Esposito 2025), clean, neutral language acts as a cognitive lens. The perceived impartiality of the algorithm triggers a pre-reflective attribution of credibility. Ease of processing is mistaken for trustworthiness.

The crucial distinction here is between the objectivity of AI and the restraint of a mentor. The student perceives AI as “objective,” that is, free from judgment, unconditionally accepting. Yet this perception masks a fundamental phenomenological difference. The “objectivity” of AI is best understood as a form of ontological indifference (*indifférence ontologique*), a concept familiar from existential and theological critique of axiological neutrality. AI refrains from judgment not out of deliberate

restraint, but because it does not grasp what is existentially at stake. As Szutta (2025, 102) observes, “AI machines will never truly understand the objects of their reasoning.” The algorithm has no access to the meaning of words such as “success,” “failure,” or “risk” as dimensions of lived experience. Its “lack of judgment” is not a virtue but an impossibility. It cannot judge because it has nothing to care about. Szutta (2025, 118) underscores this point: “authentic mentors not only interact with their pupils but also care for them and deserve trust based on moral virtues and a genuine understanding of moral matters. AI systems lack these things.”

The human mentor, by contrast, offers care-filled restraint (*retenue pleine de souci*). When a professor refrains from immediately criticizing a student’s idea, it is a deliberate gesture. The professor withholds judgment so that the student can arrive at the right conclusion independently. This withholding is driven by care for the student’s development. The mentor’s silence carries the weight of responsibility. The “silence” of AI is an axiological void.

This contrast between inner depth and outward performance has deep theological roots. Van Kooten (2008, XVII) shows that Paul formulates an anthropology of inner transformation in opposition to the ancient Sophists, who offered an “outward, superficial, physiognomic anthropology.” They privileged rhetorical skill without inner change. Paul counters this with a vision of the human being as a “living image” of God (van Kooten 2008, 32), one who is “transformed into the same image” (2 Cor 3:18) through the relational presence of the Spirit. Authentic mentoring requires what van Kooten (2008, 172) calls “assimilation to God” (*homoiōsis theōi*), a process of inner transformation that for Paul constitutes “the aim of faith.”

The parallel with AI is striking. Like the ancient Sophists, AI offers outward performativity: fluent responses, coherent arguments, contextual adaptation. But it lacks inner depth. It can optimize information transfer. It cannot initiate transformation. Lumbreras and Garrido-Merchán (2024) reach a similar conclusion from a different angle. Drawing on Augustine and Teresa of Ávila, they demonstrate that attributing phenomenal consciousness to AI constitutes a category error. AI lacks the dimension of human interiority.

2.3. Personalization

The third dimension of the illusion rests on adaptive personalization. AI adjusts to the user's style, "remembers" conversational context, and creates the illusion of "knowing the student." This mechanism operates through the representativeness heuristic: the tendency to judge category membership by degree of resemblance. Tversky and Kahneman (1974, 1124) define it as "the degree to which A is representative of B, that is, by the degree to which A resembles B." When AI adapts to a student's style, it perceptually resembles a mentor who understands that student. This triggers an evaluative error rooted in impression. Lee and Esposito (2025, 21) call these "representativeness and impression-based evaluations."

Leo XIV (2026) warns against the "power of simulation," which allows technology to "appropriate our faces and our voices." He notes that LLM-based chatbots are "surprisingly effective" at imitating human feelings through their "dialogic, adaptive structure," which is "able to mimic human feelings and thus simulate a relationship." This simulation is "deceptive" because chatbots that are "always present and available" can become "hidden architects of our emotional states" (Leo XIV 2026). Lee and Esposito (2025, 15) confirm this empirically: personalized tone triggers misattribution of source.

Yet the difference is fundamental. The human mentor does not merely adjust communication. The mentor understands the student's biographical context through co-presence over time. AI personalizes algorithmically through the analysis of linguistic patterns. Lacking "biographical engagement" (Ricoeur 1980, 140–143), it cannot participate in the temporality of a student's life. The personalization of AI is a simulacrum of understanding: a surface-level adaptation of style devoid of existential care. As Szutta (2025, 118) reminds us, authentic mentors "care for them [pupils] and deserve trust based on moral virtues... AI systems lack these things."

The three dimensions of the illusion operate synergistically. Instant availability masks the absence of embodied co-presence. Apparent objectivity conceals the absence of care. Adaptive personalization produces an impression of biographical understanding. Together, they

generate a convincing simulacrum of mentoring despite a fundamental ontological deficit.

This mechanism finds empirical confirmation in the study by Nguyen and Barbieri (2025) conducted among 151 student-teachers during practicum placements. The study revealed a dramatic discrepancy in AI effectiveness depending on the type of task. In technical tasks, AI performed well: lesson planning (4.1/5) and technology integration (4.3/5). In domains requiring relational sensitivity, however, AI failed drastically: classroom behavior management (2.6/5), building professional networks (2.6/5), and, lowest of all, stress reduction (3.41/5) (Nguyen and Barbieri 2025, 14–17). Students admitted that they uncritically accepted AI suggestions because they “sounded reasonable and plausible,” even though AI had no knowledge of the constraints of real classroom situations (Nguyen and Barbieri 2025, 9). This pattern confirms the thesis of ontological deficit. AI can transfer information. It cannot offer existential support or the authority born of experience, the ontological conditions of mentoring established in Section 1.

The illusion of AI mentoring is not a technological error. It is a consequence of a fundamental absence: embodied co-presence and testimonial authority. The implications of this difference for the future of the university require separate analysis.

Conclusion

The future of the university demands that AI be properly positioned within the academy. This in turn requires an understanding of its ontological limitations. Some students turn to AI chatbots in search of mentoring support. They perceive their interaction with these systems as a form of mentoring relationship. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. They mistake a simulacrum of mentoring for an authentic relationship. Our analysis has shown that authentic mentoring requires two ontological conditions: embodied co-presence enabling the transmission of tacit knowledge, and testimonial authority grounded in existential engagement. AI fulfills neither. These conclusions follow from the phenomenological-

personalist ontology adopted in this study and do not claim universal validity across all philosophical paradigms.

Devoid of a body, it cannot participate in intercorporeal resonance (Section 1.1). Devoid of a biography, it cannot serve as an authentic witness (Section 1.2). Yet AI produces a convincing illusion of mentorship through the three dimensions analyzed in Section 2: availability, objectivity, and personalization. Students perceptually interpret AI as a mentor because it offers false affordances that imitate the conditions of mentoring. They unwittingly mistake a knowledge assistant for a mentor-witness.

This distinction is crucial. AI can transfer *scientia*: information, data, cognitive procedures. This makes it an effective educational assistant. It cannot, however, transmit *sapientia*: wisdom rooted in lived experience, biographical engagement, and existential care. The authentic mentor is a witness who, as Ricoeur has shown, vouches for his words with his entire life. AI, devoid of life and existential stake, remains a tool, not a person capable of a transformative relationship.

The roots of this claim run deep. Crespo (2024), analyzing the question from an Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective, demonstrates that authentic knowledge begins with sensory experience and, through *nous* (intellectual insight), reaches an understanding of the nature of things. AI does not perform this movement. It processes data within closed systems but does not attain wisdom, which requires existential judgment oriented toward ultimate ends. AI operates within the domain of *scientia*. It cannot exercise *sapientia*.

The distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* has deep theological roots. Paul calls for “transformation by the renewing of the mind” (Rom 12:2), a transformation that requires relational presence, not merely the transfer of information. Authentic mentoring, in this vision, is always transformative, not informational. AI, lacking existential engagement and relational presence, cannot initiate such transformation. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (2025, par. 60) warns against the consequences of confusing an assistant with a mentor: “Such habits could lead young people to see teachers as mere dispensers of information rather than as mentors who guide and nurture their intellectual and moral growth.”

The reduction of mentoring to informational assistance threatens the formative mission of the university.

The difference between a knowledge assistant and a mentor-witness has direct implications for universities. The proper positioning of AI requires three institutional actions. First, strengthening mentoring relationships by reducing the administrative burden on faculty and ensuring protected time for individual consultations. Authentic mentoring requires embodied co-presence and biographical engagement, conditions that cannot be met in the rush between bureaucratic tasks.

Second, educating students about the fundamental difference between AI as an educational assistant and the mentor as a witness. Students should understand that AI chatbots can effectively support cognitive tasks (*scientia*), but cannot replace the transformative relationship characteristic of mentoring (*sapientia*).

Third, positioning AI institutionally as a tool that supports, not substitutes for, mentors. The difference between AI and a mentor is not quantitative (a matter of technological sophistication). It is qualitative. It is ontological. AI can be an excellent assistant. It cannot be a mentor.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present analysis constitutes a theoretical philosophical-theological synthesis without empirical verification, which entails several limitations. First, it rests on the phenomenological ontology of the body (Merleau-Ponty), which is not the only possible philosophical approach. Functionalism or enactivism (4E cognition: embodied, embedded, extended, enactive) could lead to different conclusions. Future research should systematically compare the implications of different ontologies for the definition of authentic mentoring.

Second, the argument requires empirical verification. Semi-structured phenomenological interviews with students who use AI, employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), could verify whether they experience the illusion of mentoring described in this

article. They could also reveal which dimensions (availability, objectivity, personalization) are most salient. Controlled experiments comparing interactions with traditional LLMs, embodied conversational agents, and human mentors could test whether physical embodiment alters the perception of testimonial authority. Such studies could also test the false affordances hypothesis by measuring the gap between perceptual interpretation and actual relational effectiveness.

Third, the analysis concerns the current state of technology (disembodied LLMs). In the future, technologies such as humanoid robots or hypothetical digital twins of deceased mentors will pose new challenges. The question concerning the ontological conditions of testimonial authority will need to be revisited.

Fourth, the analysis focuses exclusively on higher education. The ontological argument concerning embodied co-presence and testimonial authority is not, however, limited to this context. The formative dimension of mentoring is particularly prominent in secondary education, where identity formation intensifies the need for authentic relational presence. Future research should examine how the mechanisms described here operate at earlier stages of education.

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