

BEYOND ALGORITHMS: WHY HUMAN VALUES MUST GUIDE THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence is transforming the world across many dimensions. But what changes lie ahead – and how can we ensure that human values remain central as intelligent systems take on more decision-making roles?

We sat down with **Dr. Eckart von Hirschhausen**, physician, author, and advocate for combining medical progress with ethical and ecological responsibility, to explore these fundamental questions.

Dr. von Hirschhausen, you have been advocating for more humane medicine and for climate protection for years. When you look at the current hype surrounding artificial intelligence, do you see more opportunities or more dangers for society?

DR. ECKART VON HIRSCHHAUSEN: In medicine, AI is a great blessing, especially for people with rare diseases. AI can immediately arrive at a diagnosis for which patients are often sent from one practice to another for years. And I would also prefer to have an AI look at a small lung finding on an X-ray – comparing it with 100,000 other images – rather than a sleep-deprived junior doctor who has only seen it once in a

textbook during their studies. But to explain what that diagnosis actually means for my life, I want an empathetic human being sitting across from me. That's why we shouldn't select the next generation of doctors based on who can memorize the most facts, but rather on who communicates well, works in a team, upholds human values, and, ultimately, whom I would even want near me in existential moments.

AI is often presented as the solution to complex problems – including climate change. Where can it really help, and where does our belief in technology merely distract from taking responsibility ourselves?

Artificial intelligence can be a valuable tool for climate protection – but it must never replace responsibility and action. With my foundation Healthy Planet – Healthy People, we show in the campaign “Echte Leistungsträger (True Achievers)” how great the real value of nature is. The biodiversity and ecosystem services of our planet are worth almost twice as much as the entire human economic output. This makes it clear: Without bees, insects, and soil organisms, there would be no fruit, no vegetables, no chocolate – and no functioning life.



PHOTO: SCHMITT PHOTO DESIGN



IMAGE CREATED BY MIDJOURNEY AI, PROMPTED BY GCO

No AI, no drone, no human with a brush can replace what an intact natural environment provides. But AI can help – for example, in the targeted use of water and fertilizers in agriculture or in species protection, when it analyzes the soundscape of a rainforest to assess biodiversity.

Yet the most important task remains: preserving natural intelligence. We must consistently protect the last contiguous areas of high biodiversity – for example, through the Legacy Landscape Fund. Without biodiversity, humanity is poor, no matter how advanced our technology may be.

Algorithms increasingly decide who gets loans, jobs, or insurance. How can we prevent AI from reinforcing injustice rather than reducing it – and how can we keep humans at the center?

To ensure that AI benefits society rather than exacerbating inequality, we must keep people consistently as our focus – not just as consumers, but as feeling, social beings. What humans truly need is not constant digital stimulation, but real experiences: community, nature, music, and meaning. Every hour spent on a smartphone robs us of a bit of that quality of life. Paradoxically, we are more “connected” than ever before – and yet at the same time, we are experiencing an epidemic of mental health issues, from loneliness to depression and anxiety.

Human kindness remains analog. When algorithms optimize for attention rather than truth, they promote populism and hatred – thereby undermining the trust that upholds our democracy. I’ve experienced this myself: Before the Higher Regional Court in Frankfurt, I won a case against Meta, requiring that deepfakes using my face and voice be deleted. Yet they

remain online. This shows how urgently we need binding rules and accountability in the digital world. Every serious actor – whether platform or advertiser – should have a fundamental interest in ensuring that the internet does not become a place of disinformation.

“What humans truly need is not constant digital stimulation, but real experiences: community, nature, music, and meaning.”

The development of AI consumes enormous resources and energy. How can high-tech progress and sustainability go together – or is that a contradiction we should openly acknowledge?

The current multi-billion-dollar race for AI will, I fear, lead to the next major crash. So far, it’s completely unclear what sustainable business model could ever justify all these investments. At the same time, massive data centers devour enormous amounts of energy – and no one is speaking openly about where that electricity actually comes from. As

long as our energy production isn’t clean, AI remains dirty too.

For an ARD television program, I tried to obtain concrete figures on the energy consumption of AI queries – in vain. Everything is a trade secret. That lack of transparency is telling. Of

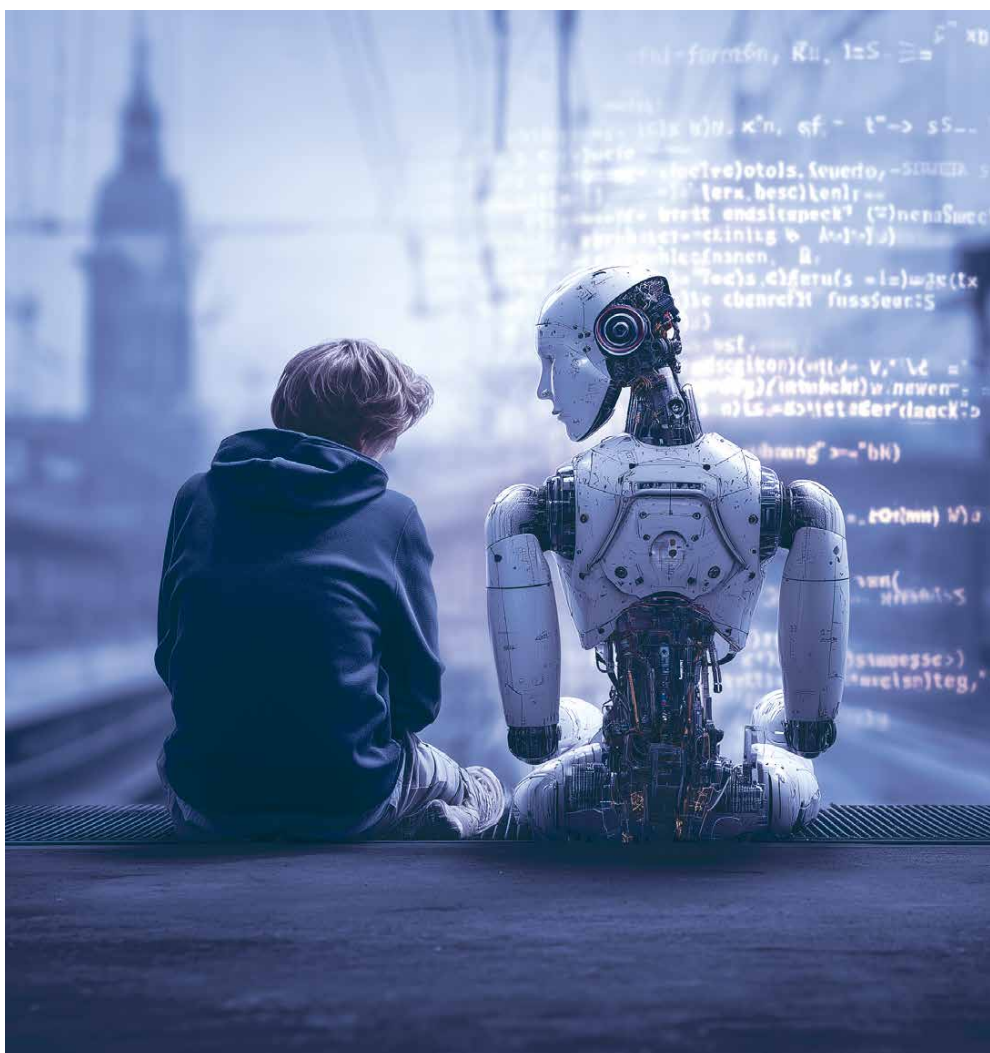


IMAGE CREATED BY MIDJOURNEY AI, PROMPTED BY GCO

course, I see the advantages: It's impressive how quickly AI systems can now search through vast amounts of data and find relevant information. But the key question remains: Does this faster access to knowledge actually make us wiser and more reasonable in our decisions? At the moment, it doesn't look that way.

Many people feel overwhelmed by the pace of technological change. How can we ensure that AI does not create fear or leave people behind, but instead builds trust?

Trust is built through transparency. Users need to know what data is being stored about them and how they can easily disable AI features they don't want. Many applications today push automated summaries or text suggestions on us without asking. I think we shouldn't let machines take over thinking and writing entirely – sometimes you just want to express something yourself. At the same time, we must not underestimate the psychological effects of digitalization. The economic costs

of mental illnesses in Germany are now on a scale comparable to the revenues of the automotive industry. Yet we constantly talk about the “phase-out of combustion engines” but hardly about the “phase-out of burnout.” When people begin forming parasocial relationships with chatbots – seeing them as gods, therapists, or even friends – and tragic consequences occur without any warning, something has gone fundamentally wrong. AI must not foster emotional dependence; it must be designed to strengthen people, not weaken them.

If you look 10 years ahead, what questions should we be asking today to prevent AI from ruling our lives tomorrow instead of enriching them?

Who do I want to have been in my life? What really matters? What should children, grandchildren, and future generations be proud of when they look back on us in 2025? Let's become good ancestors!

This interview was conducted by Florian Ritter (NIM)