GenAware | Article Analysis

The Catholic Church Rewired Brains for Centuries. AI Is Doing It in Years.

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Contents

Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Reading Passage

Two centuries ago, only twelve per cent of the world's adults could read. Today, eighty-seven per cent can. That transformation is usually told as a triumph of schools and printing presses, but it is also a biological story. As literacy spread, human brains physically reorganised. The connection between the two hemispheres thickened. A region that had evolved to recognise faces was repurposed to recognise letters. No gene mutated; no new evolutionary pressure emerged. A purely cultural practice — making marks on surfaces and teaching people to decode them — had reached inside the human skull and rewired the organ that makes us human.

This pattern, in which culture remakes biology, is not a curiosity. It is the rule. Anthropologists argue that cooking, markets, kinship rules, and writing have all reshaped human physiology and psychology in ways that genetics cannot explain. The most powerful cultural forces in history have done so by hijacking three forces that drive any evolutionary process: variation (new ideas appearing), transmission (ideas spreading), and selection (some ideas surviving while others vanish). The medieval Catholic Church is a striking example. By defining orthodoxy and heresy, monopolising literacy, and dismantling extended-family kinship structures across Europe — banning cousin marriage, polygyny, and arranged marriages — the Church controlled all three. The result was not just a change in belief but a change in cognition and even in hormones: populations exposed to centuries of Church-enforced monogamy show measurably different psychological and biological profiles from those that did not.

The author of this paper, an investment manager at Baillie Gifford whose firm holds stakes in major AI companies, argues that artificial intelligence is now doing something analogous, but at a speed and scale the medieval Church could never have imagined. AI accelerates variation: drug-discovery scientists can now analyse thousands of plant molecules in less time than it once took to characterise one. AI centralises transmission: when a child asks ChatGPT why the sky is blue, they are learning from a single model trained on the accumulated text of human civilisation, and a handful of model providers now mediate a vast share of the world's question-answering. AI also reshapes selection. Recommendation algorithms — already the dominant filter for music, news, and political argument — do not select for truth or usefulness but for engagement. Through this lens, the author argues, Elon Musk's forty-four-billion-dollar purchase of Twitter looks less like buying a company than buying a mechanism for deciding which ideas get amplified.

But here's the catch. AI is not merely changing what people do; it may be changing what they become. Researchers at MIT studied participants' brain activity over four months as they wrote essays under three conditions: unaided, with search engines, or with AI assistants. The AI users showed the weakest neural connectivity of the three groups, suggesting their brains were barely engaged. Better outputs, weaker minds — a quiet trade most users never notice. The London School of Economics scholar Michael Muthukrishna has gone further, arguing that AI represents a fourth learning system beyond genes, culture, and individual trial-and-error: one capable of finding patterns in the entire human cultural corpus that no single mind or generation could uncover. AlphaGo's 2016 defeat of the world's best Go players is the proof of concept. The machine invented strategies no human had played in 2,500 years; humans then studied those strategies and improved

their own play.

Seen this way, AI is not a productivity tool or an economic disruptor. It is the next great rewiring. Whether that rewiring strengthens human thought, as literacy did, or hollows it out, as the early evidence on AI-assisted writing hints, is the question that will define the coming decades.

2. Explanation (Ages 14-18)

> ***Two hundred years ago, only 12% of adults could read — and as literacy spread, human brains physically rewired. AI may be the next rewiring, except it's happening at warp speed.***

What's Going On?

An investment manager at Baillie Gifford — one of the firms with serious money in AI companies — just wrote a paper arguing that AI's biggest impact won't be on jobs or GDP. It'll be on human minds. Literally. He points out that cultural technologies like reading have historically reorganised the actual structure of our brains, and AI is now an even more powerful version of that.

His argument leans on research showing that the Catholic Church didn't just spread beliefs across medieval Europe — it altered hormone profiles, kinship structures, and psychology across entire populations by controlling what ideas could spread, who taught them, and which ones got selected. AI, the author claims, is doing the same thing today, but at a scale and speed that medieval institutions couldn't have dreamed of.

How To Think About It

Cultural evolution works through three levers: variation (new ideas appearing), transmission (how ideas spread), and selection (which ideas survive). Powerful institutions throughout history have grabbed all three. AI is the latest contender.

- Think of how TikTok's algorithm decides what music becomes a hit. The song doesn't 'win' because it's objectively the best — it wins because the algorithm noticed people watching it. Now imagine that same logic applied to ideas, knowledge, and values for hundreds of millions of users at once.
- Or think about AlphaGo beating the world's best Go players in 2016. The AI invented moves no human had played in 2,500 years of the game. Then top humans studied those moves and got better. AI didn't replace the players — it became a teacher rewiring how humans think about the game.

Key Things To Know

- Adult literacy went from 12% globally 200 years ago to 87% today — and brain scans show readers' hemispheres are physically more connected than non-readers'.
- An MIT study tracked brain activity over four months as people wrote essays unaided, with search engines, or with AI. AI users showed the weakest neural connectivity, suggesting they were barely cognitively engaged.
- A handful of model providers — OpenAI, Anthropic, Google — now mediate a massive share of the world's question-answering. That's more centralised than any teacher, textbook, or church in history.
- The author argues Elon Musk's $44bn Twitter purchase makes more sense if you see it not as buying a company but buying a selection mechanism — the power to decide which ideas get amplified.
- The common assumption is that AI is just a productivity tool. The non-obvious reality: tools that shape how we think eventually shape what we are.

Why It Matters

You are the first generation to do homework, form opinions, and figure out who you are with an AI in your pocket. The MIT study isn't abstract — it's about what happens to your brain when you outsource thinking. This doesn't mean don't use AI. It means notice the trade. Every time you let a model write something for you, you're getting a better output and weaker mental muscles, the same way using GPS for years makes people worse at navigation.

The Bigger Picture

The historical parallel is sobering. The Catholic Church took centuries to reshape European minds; AI is doing comparable work in years. Watch for second-order effects: convergence of writing styles globally, decline in independent reasoning skills measured on standardised tests, and political fights over who controls the major models — because whoever controls them controls the selection mechanism for ideas. The countries and companies that figure this out first won't just win economically. They'll shape what the next human mind looks like.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Cultural evolution

The idea that human societies change over time through the same kind of process as biological evolution — ideas and practices vary, get passed on, and are selected for or against — but operating on culture rather than genes.

Variation, transmission, selection

The three forces driving any evolutionary process: new versions appear (variation), they get copied or shared (transmission), and some survive while others die out (selection).

Recommendation algorithm

Software that decides what content to show you next — the engines behind TikTok's For You page, YouTube suggestions, and Spotify playlists. They optimise for engagement, not truth or quality.

Neural connectivity

How strongly different brain regions are communicating with each other. Higher connectivity during a task usually means deeper cognitive engagement.

Polygyny

A marriage system where one man has multiple wives. The author mentions it because the Catholic Church's ban on it across Europe measurably changed male hormone levels at population scale.

Selection mechanism

Whatever decides which ideas, products, or behaviours spread and which die out. Historically it was communities and institutions; today it's increasingly algorithms.

AlphaGo

An AI built by DeepMind that defeated the world's best Go players in 2016-17, famously by inventing strategies no human had ever played in the game's 2,500-year history.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- ◯ **A)** AI will eliminate most knowledge-economy jobs within a decade unless governments intervene.
- ◯ **B)** AI is a cultural technology reshaping how humans think, comparable to literacy and the medieval Church.
- ◯ **C)** AI companies like OpenAI and Google are becoming dangerously profitable monopolies in technology.
- ◯ **D)** The Catholic Church remains the most influential cultural force in shaping the modern human mind.

Q2. According to the passage, the Catholic Church reshaped European minds primarily by

- ◯ **A)** offering beliefs that were self-evidently more compelling than competing religions.
- ◯ **B)** controlling the variation, transmission, and selection of ideas across the continent.
- ◯ **C)** encouraging extended kinship networks that strengthened community bonds.
- ◯ **D)** promoting scientific literacy through universities and monastic libraries.

Q3. As used in the passage, the word "hijacked" most nearly means

- ◯ **A)** violently stole from rightful owners.
- ◯ **B)** took control of and redirected.
- ◯ **C)** secretly observed and recorded.
- ◯ **D)** imitated without giving credit.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word "convergent" most nearly means

- ◯ **A)** rapidly accelerating.
- ◯ **B)** tending toward sameness.
- ◯ **C)** scientifically rigorous.
- ◯ **D)** globally translated.

Q5. The MIT essay-writing study is included in the passage primarily to

- ◯ **A)** prove that AI tools are less accurate than search engines for academic work.
- ◯ **B)** provide empirical evidence that AI use is already changing how human brains engage.
- ◯ **C)** argue that students should be banned from using AI assistants in school.
- ◯ **D)** demonstrate that handwritten essays produce higher-quality writing than typed ones.

Q6. Which statement about recommendation algorithms can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- ◯ **A)** They have improved cultural quality by surfacing the most useful information.
- ◯ **B)** They will eventually be replaced by AI models trained on better data.
- ◯ **C)** They have weakened the link between an idea's spread and its actual usefulness.
- ◯ **D)** They were originally designed by the same researchers who built AlphaGo.

Q7. The passage suggests that Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter is best understood as

- ◯ **A)** an emotional decision driven by personal grievances against the platform's leadership.
- ◯ **B)** a financially rational bet on advertising revenue growth in social media.
- ◯ **C)** an acquisition of control over a mechanism for selecting which ideas spread widely.
- ◯ **D)** a strategic effort to compete directly with OpenAI in the AI assistant market.

Q8. The author's tone throughout the passage is best described as

- ◯ **A)** alarmed and openly hostile toward AI development.
- ◯ **B)** analytical and concerned, but not dismissive of AI's value.
- ◯ **C)** celebratory about AI's transformative economic potential.
- ◯ **D)** neutral and detached, presenting only objective facts.

Q9. Which of the following can most reasonably be inferred about the author's view of AI's relationship to human thought?

- ◯ **A)** AI will fully replace human reasoning within the next generation.
- ◯ **B)** AI changes not only what humans do but what humans become cognitively.
- ◯ **C)** AI's effects on cognition are exaggerated by media coverage and unsupported by research.
- ◯ **D)** AI primarily affects professional workers and has little impact on students or children.

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- ◯ **A)** "We hold stakes in many of the businesses building AI today."
- ◯ **B)** "AlphaGo's defeat of the world's best Go players in 2016-2017 illustrates the dynamic."
- ◯ **C)** "The question is not whether AI changes what people do, but whether it changes what people become."
- ◯ **D)** "A handful of model providers now mediate an enormous share of the world's question-answering."

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: B

The passage explicitly frames AI as 'the next great rewiring' and draws a sustained parallel between AI, literacy, and the Church's effects on human cognition. (A) is wrong — TRAP C: a real-world claim about AI but the author pointedly says the paper is NOT about jobs. SAT Tip: Central-idea questions reward the option that covers the WHOLE passage, not just one section. If an option only fits the opening or the ending, it's a distractor.

Q2. According to the passage, the Catholic Church reshaped European minds primarily by

Answer: B

The passage states the Church 'reshaped all three forces at once' — defining orthodoxy (variation), monopolising literacy and pulpit (transmission), and dismantling kinship structures (selection). (C) is wrong — TRAP A: right scope, wrong direction; the Church dismantled kinship networks rather than encouraging them. SAT Tip: When an option flips the direction of a relationship described in the passage, it's almost always a trap. Re-read the verb.

Q3. As used in the passage, the word "hijacked" most nearly means

Answer: B

The passage describes how transformative cultural forces 'didn't simply participate in this process. They hijacked it' — meaning they seized and steered the three evolutionary forces. (A) is wrong — TRAP B: it's the common everyday meaning of hijacked, but the passage uses it metaphorically about a process, not a vehicle. SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option in place of the word. The right answer leaves the sentence's meaning intact; the common dictionary meaning is usually the trap.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word "convergent" most nearly means

Answer: B

The passage contrasts AI's 'centralised and convergent body of knowledge' with the diverse outputs of many human teachers, signalling that convergent here means tending toward a single, uniform direction. (A) is wrong — TRAP B: it uses passage-adjacent vocabulary (the article emphasises speed) but doesn't fit this specific word. SAT Tip: Vocab questions test the meaning in CONTEXT. Cover the answer choices, predict the meaning yourself from the sentence, then look for the match.

Q5. The MIT essay-writing study is included in the passage primarily to

Answer: B

The study appears in a section titled 'Your mind is changing already' and is used to back the claim that AI is altering cognitive engagement now, not someday. (C) is wrong — TRAP C: a plausible real-world position, but the author makes no policy recommendation about banning AI. SAT Tip: When asked WHY an example is included, find the claim it sits next to in the passage. Examples serve arguments — locate the argument first.

Q6. Which statement about recommendation algorithms can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: C

The passage states algorithms 'do not select for truth, usefulness or cultural richness' but for engagement, and that algorithmic selection has 'decoupled cultural fitness from human judgement.' (A) is wrong — TRAP A: opposite direction; the passage argues algorithms have weakened, not improved, this link. SAT Tip: Inference questions reward small, defensible steps from the passage — not big creative leaps. If you can't point to a sentence supporting

it, it's not the answer.

Q7. The passage suggests that Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter is best understood as

Answer: C

The author writes that Musk 'wasn't buying a social media company. He was buying a selection mechanism — the power to shape which ideas, narratives and values get amplified.' (B) is wrong — TRAP C: a reasonable real-world theory of the deal, but it's not what the passage argues. SAT Tip: 'The passage suggests' means stick to the passage's interpretation, not yours or the news's. Outside knowledge is a trap, not an asset.

Q8. The author's tone throughout the passage is best described as

Answer: B

The author is an investor in AI companies and treats AI seriously as a transformative force, while raising clear concerns about cognitive and cultural effects — analytical with worry, not hostility. (A) is wrong — TRAP B: uses passage-adjacent ideas (the warnings) but exaggerates them into hostility, which the author's investor stance contradicts. SAT Tip: Tone questions reward the moderate option. Extreme adjectives ('hostile,' 'celebratory,' 'detached') are usually wrong because real authors hold mixed positions.

Q9. Which of the following can most reasonably be inferred about the author's view of AI's relationship to human thought?

Answer: B

The passage explicitly states 'the question is not whether AI changes what people do, but whether it changes what people become' and provides MIT brain-scan evidence that it already is. (A) is wrong — TRAP A: scope is right (AI and cognition) but direction is too extreme; the passage talks about rewiring, not replacing. SAT Tip: When two options point the same direction but one is more extreme, the moderate one is usually correct on the SAT.

Q10. Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: C

Option C is almost a verbatim statement of the inference in question 9 — that AI alters not just behaviour but identity and cognition. (D) is wrong — TRAP B: it uses passage vocabulary about AI's reach but speaks to centralisation, not to the change-in-being claim. SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, find the line that DIRECTLY supports your previous answer — usually one option matches almost word-for-word. Pick that one, even if others feel relevant.