

Existential Sovereignty: A Theory of Human Flourishing in AI-Mediated Environments

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Abstract: Artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally transforming how individuals learn, work, communicate, create, and make decisions. Although existing scholarship has advanced understanding of human flourishing, existential meaning, responsible AI, and human-centered technology, comparatively little attention has been given to the human capacity required to preserve human authorship while engaging increasingly capable intelligent systems. This conceptual paper addresses that gap by introducing Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST), a middle-range theory explaining how individuals maintain authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence within AI-mediated environments. Developed through an integrative conceptual approach, EST synthesizes insights from existential psychology, positive psychology, Conscious Intelligence, and Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence to propose Existential Sovereignty as the central human capacity linking AI engagement with sustained human flourishing. The theory conceptualizes AI as a cognitive partner that augments, but does not replace, human agency and proposes that Existential Sovereignty is expressed through six interconnected Domains of Human Authorship: meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships. Collectively, these domains explain how individuals preserve human authorship while benefiting from AI-supported cognition. The paper further presents the theory's foundational assumptions, dynamic operation, and theoretical propositions, and discusses its implications for education, healthcare, organizational leadership, AI governance, and future research. By shifting scholarly attention from technological capability to the preservation of human authorship, EST provides a novel theoretical framework for understanding human flourishing in increasingly AI-mediated societies and establishes a foundation for future empirical research, including development of the Existential Sovereignty Scale (ESS).

Keywords: Artificial intelligence; existential sovereignty; human flourishing; human authorship; human-centered AI; Conscious Intelligence; existential psychology; theory development.

I. INTRODUCTION

For most of human history, the capacity to think, reason, judge, create, remember, and construct meaning has remained fundamentally human. Technologies have amplified these capacities by extending physical labor, improving communication, accelerating computation, and expanding access to knowledge, yet they have not participated directly in the cognitive and existential processes through which individuals interpret experience, construct identity, exercise judgment, and define purpose. Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a fundamental departure from previous technological revolutions because it increasingly participates in activities traditionally regarded as uniquely human, including reasoning, content generation, decision support, problem solving, and creative production (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Russell & Norvig, 2021). This transition marks a profound shift in the relationship between humans and technology, creating conditions in which cognition is no longer exclusively human but increasingly shared between people and intelligent systems. The rapid diffusion of generative AI has consequently transformed scholarly attention from technological capability toward broader questions concerning human adaptation. Contemporary research has extensively examined AI adoption, organizational transformation, productivity, and innovation (Dwivedi et al., 2023), while parallel scholarship has emphasized trustworthy AI, ethical governance, transparency, fairness, accountability, and human oversight (Floridi et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021). More recently, researchers have investigated AI-assisted mental health interventions, digital well-being, and human-

centered AI, demonstrating that intelligent systems can support psychological care, enhance learning, and improve decision-making when responsibly implemented (Hua et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies have substantially advanced understanding of how AI should be developed and deployed. However, they provide comparatively limited explanation of how individuals preserve authorship over their thinking, values, identity, and meaning while increasingly engaging intelligent systems in cognitive activities.

This challenge extends beyond technological design or ethical governance because it concerns the human condition itself. Existential psychology has long argued that psychological well-being depends upon the capacity to discover meaning, exercise responsibility, and choose one's response to life's circumstances (Frankl, 1963, 1988). Likewise, positive psychology conceptualizes human flourishing as the realization of psychological, relational, and moral potential through purposeful living and meaningful engagement with others (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011). These perspectives establish that flourishing depends upon capacities such as meaning, agency, responsibility, and authentic relationships. Yet they were developed before the emergence of AI systems capable of participating in reasoning, communication, and decision-making, leaving unanswered how these distinctly human capacities are preserved when cognition itself becomes increasingly distributed between humans and intelligent technologies.

Several contemporary frameworks partially address this emerging reality. Human-centered AI emphasizes designing intelligent systems that augment rather than replace human capabilities (Shneiderman, 2022). Responsible AI frameworks focus on fairness, accountability, transparency, and human oversight (Floridi et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2021). The Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework (Bull, 2026) explains the reflective, metacognitive, ethical, and epistemic capacities required for responsible engagement with AI, while logotherapy explains the existential significance of meaning, responsibility, and purposeful living (Frankl, 1988). Each framework contributes important insights, yet each addresses only part of the broader phenomenon. Human-centered AI primarily explains the technological environment; responsible AI focuses on governance; Conscious Intelligence explains cognitive regulation; and logotherapy explains existential meaning. None explicitly explains how individuals preserve authorship over their existence while engaging increasingly capable AI systems.

Accordingly, an important theoretical gap remains. Existing scholarship explains how AI should be designed, how AI should be governed, how humans should think critically, and why meaning is essential to well-being, yet no comprehensive theory explains how these capacities converge to preserve the uniquely human ability to remain the author of one's meaning, identity, judgment, responsibility, and authentic relationships in AI-mediated environments. As AI increasingly participates in activities once considered exclusively human, preserving this authorship becomes a fundamental condition for sustaining psychological well-being, social connectedness, and long-term human flourishing.

The purpose of this paper is to propose Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST), a middle-range theory explaining how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence. The central proposition of the theory is that human flourishing in AI-mediated environments depends not primarily on the capabilities of artificial intelligence, but on the preservation of existential sovereignty during human–AI interaction. Drawing upon existential psychology, Conscious Intelligence, human-centered AI, and theories of human flourishing, the proposed theory offers a new conceptual explanation of how people remain fully human while increasingly sharing cognitive activities with intelligent systems.

This paper employs a theory synthesis approach to develop Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST), a middle-range theory explaining how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence (AI). Theory synthesis integrates complementary concepts from multiple theoretical traditions to explain phenomena that cannot be adequately understood through a single existing theory (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). Rather than generating new empirical evidence, this approach critically evaluates existing scholarship, identifies conceptual limitations, and develops a coherent theoretical explanation of an emerging phenomenon.

The need for theory synthesis arises because contemporary scholarship on AI has evolved along largely independent lines. Research on artificial intelligence has primarily focused on technological capability, adoption, productivity, and innovation (Dwivedi et al., 2023), while responsible and human-centered AI has emphasized ethical governance, transparency, accountability, fairness, and human oversight (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Parallel research in psychology has examined human flourishing, psychological well-being, resilience, and meaning in life (Frankl, 1963,

1988; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011), whereas emerging work on Conscious Intelligence has addressed reflective and ethically regulated engagement with AI (Bull, 2026). Although these perspectives collectively advance understanding of AI and human functioning, they have largely developed independently and do not provide an integrated explanation of how individuals preserve human authorship while increasingly sharing cognitive activities with intelligent systems.

This paper synthesizes insights from four complementary domains: human flourishing, logotherapy, Conscious Intelligence, and human-centered AI. These perspectives are not treated as competing theories but as complementary lenses that illuminate different aspects of the emerging phenomenon. Human flourishing identifies the desired human outcome; logotherapy explains the existential significance of meaning and responsibility; Conscious Intelligence explains the cognitive-regulatory capacities required for human AI engagement; and human-centered AI defines the technological environment within which human–AI interaction occurs. Collectively, these perspectives establish the theoretical foundation from which Existential Sovereignty Theory is developed.

Consistent with Merton's (1968) conception of middle-range theory, Existential Sovereignty Theory is not intended as a universal theory of artificial intelligence or human behavior. Rather, it seeks to explain a specific contemporary phenomenon: how individuals preserve authorship over their existence while engaging increasingly capable AI systems. The theory introduces Existential Sovereignty as a new theoretical construct to explain this phenomenon, delineates it from related concepts, and advances theoretical propositions intended to guide future empirical investigation, instrument development, and practical application across education, healthcare, organizations, and public policy.

Theoretical Foundations

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) draws upon four complementary bodies of scholarship that collectively illuminate the human capacities required to flourish within increasingly AI-mediated environments. Although these traditions emerged from different disciplines and address distinct aspects of human experience, each contributes an essential perspective for understanding how individuals preserve authorship over their lives while engaging intelligent technologies. Specifically, the theory is informed by human flourishing theory, which defines the multidimensional nature of optimal human well-being; logotherapy, which emphasizes meaning, freedom, and responsibility as fundamental characteristics of human existence; Conscious Intelligence, which explains the reflective, metacognitive, and ethical capacities required for responsible human–AI engagement; and Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI), which advocates for technologies that augment rather than diminish human capabilities (Bull, 2026; Frankl, 1963, 1988; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; Shneiderman, 2022; VanderWeele, 2017).

While each of these perspectives provides valuable insight, none independently explains how individuals preserve authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence as artificial intelligence becomes an increasingly influential cognitive partner. Human flourishing frameworks describe desirable outcomes but offer limited explanation of how flourishing is maintained during sustained AI engagement. Logotherapy explains the human search for meaning and responsibility but predates contemporary human–AI interaction. Conscious Intelligence provides a framework for reflective and ethical regulation of AI engagement but does not explicitly address the broader existential dimensions of human authorship. Similarly, Human-Centered AI emphasizes the design and governance of intelligent systems but primarily focuses on technology rather than the internal human capacities required to sustain flourishing.

EST integrates these complementary traditions into a unified theoretical framework by proposing that Existential Sovereignty is the central human capacity through which individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging artificial intelligence. The following sections examine each theoretical foundation and demonstrate how their integration provides the conceptual basis for the development of EST.

Human Flourishing. Human flourishing has long been regarded as the highest expression of human well-being and optimal functioning. Its intellectual roots extend to Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, which distinguished a fulfilled life from the pursuit of pleasure or material success. Rather than equating well-being with happiness alone, Aristotle argued that flourishing is achieved through the realization of human potential, the cultivation of virtue, and the pursuit of meaningful purposes within society (Aristotle, trans. 2009). This eudaimonic perspective established flourishing as a multidimensional process involving moral development, purposeful action, and lifelong personal growth, laying the philosophical foundation for contemporary theories of psychological well-being.

Modern psychology has expanded the concept of flourishing into empirically supported models that encompass psychological, social, and existential dimensions of human functioning. Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being conceptualizes flourishing through six interrelated domains: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. These dimensions emphasize that optimal functioning involves more than emotional satisfaction; it requires individuals to develop meaningful goals, maintain healthy relationships, exercise independent judgment, and continuously adapt to changing life circumstances. Ryff's framework remains one of the most influential models of eudaimonic well-being because it integrates individual development with purposeful engagement in life.

Positive psychology further broadened the understanding of flourishing by emphasizing human strengths and optimal functioning rather than psychological dysfunction. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model identifies five foundational elements of flourishing: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Collectively, these dimensions suggest that flourishing emerges through sustained participation in meaningful activities, supportive social relationships, purposeful living, and opportunities for achievement. Complementing this perspective, Keyes (1998, 2002) argued that flourishing also depends upon social well-being, including social integration, contribution, coherence, acceptance, and actualization. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that flourishing extends beyond individual psychological health to encompass meaningful participation in families, organizations, and communities.

Recent scholarship has increasingly conceptualized flourishing as a holistic indicator of human development that integrates psychological health, physical well-being, meaningful relationships, character, purpose, and social participation. VanderWeele (2017) proposed flourishing as a multidimensional construct encompassing happiness, health, meaning, character, relationships, and material stability, while Ryan and Deci (2001) emphasized that enduring well-being depends upon satisfying fundamental psychological needs through self-directed and meaningful activity. Across these perspectives, flourishing consistently emerges as a dynamic process through which individuals develop their capacities, contribute to society, and experience lives characterized by purpose, responsibility, and authentic human connection.

Although these theories have significantly advanced understanding of optimal human functioning, they were largely developed before artificial intelligence became an integral participant in learning, communication, creativity, and decision-making. Consequently, they generally assume that cognition, judgment, and meaning-making remain fundamentally human processes. Today, however, individuals increasingly share cognitive activities with intelligent systems that assist in generating ideas, evaluating information, solving problems, and making decisions. This shift raises questions that existing flourishing theories do not explicitly address: How are autonomy, purpose, authentic relationships, and meaningful living preserved when cognition itself is increasingly mediated by artificial intelligence? Existing models identify the dimensions of flourishing but provide limited explanation of the human capacities required to sustain flourishing under conditions of shared human-AI cognition.

Understanding flourishing in AI-mediated environments requires moving beyond descriptions of well-being to examine the existential processes through which individuals preserve purpose, responsibility, and meaning while engaging intelligent technologies. Among existing theoretical perspectives, logotherapy provides perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of why meaning remains indispensable to human flourishing. The following section therefore examines logotherapy as the existential foundation upon which the present theory is built.

Logotherapy and the Search for Meaning. Among existential theories of human development, logotherapy provides one of the most comprehensive explanations of the role of meaning in human existence. Developed by Viktor E. Frankl following his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, logotherapy proposes that the primary motivational force of human life is the will to meaning rather than the pursuit of pleasure or power (Frankl, 1963, 1988). According to Frankl, individuals are fundamentally oriented toward discovering purpose and significance in their lives, and psychological well-being depends largely on their capacity to realize that purpose despite adversity, uncertainty, or suffering. Meaning is therefore not an optional psychological resource but an essential condition for healthy human functioning.

Central to logotherapy is the proposition that meaning is realized through the exercise of freedom and responsibility. Although individuals cannot always control external circumstances, they retain the freedom to choose their attitudes, make human decisions, and assume responsibility for their actions (Frankl, 1988). This emphasis distinguishes logotherapy from deterministic perspectives by recognizing the human person as an active participant in shaping life rather than a passive recipient of environmental influences. Frankl further argued that meaning may be discovered through creative values (what

individuals contribute to the world), experiential values (what they receive through relationships, beauty, and love), and attitudinal values (the stance adopted toward unavoidable suffering). Collectively, these pathways demonstrate that meaning is constructed through human engagement with life rather than through external achievement alone.

Contemporary research has extended Frankl's work by demonstrating that meaning in life is consistently associated with psychological resilience, emotional well-being, hope, life satisfaction, and adaptive coping across diverse populations (Batthyány, 2021; Breitbart, 2017; Vos et al., 2015). Meaning-centered interventions have shown positive effects among individuals confronting serious illness, trauma, grief, and other existential challenges, reinforcing the proposition that purpose and responsibility serve as protective factors against despair and psychological distress. These findings suggest that meaning functions not merely as an emotional experience but as a dynamic process through which individuals interpret circumstances, organize values, and sustain purposeful action.

The emergence of artificial intelligence introduces a new context in which the search for meaning must be reconsidered. Intelligent systems increasingly assist individuals in learning, problem solving, communication, creativity, and decision-making. While these technologies can expand human capability, they also raise questions concerning authorship, responsibility, authenticity, and personal agency. If AI increasingly participates in cognitive activities that contribute to human identity and purpose, preserving meaning cannot be understood solely as an internal psychological process. Rather, individuals must humanly determine how AI will be incorporated into their lives without relinquishing responsibility for their judgments, values, or life direction. Consequently, the existential challenge presented by AI is not whether technology can generate meaningful outputs but whether human beings remain the primary authors of the meanings by which they live.

Although logotherapy offers profound insights into meaning, responsibility, and human freedom, it does not explicitly address environments in which intelligent technologies participate in cognitive processes once considered uniquely human. Frankl wrote within a historical context in which meaning was negotiated primarily through human experience and interpersonal relationships rather than through continuous interaction with autonomous computational systems. Accordingly, logotherapy explains why meaning remains indispensable but provides limited guidance regarding how individuals preserve meaning while increasingly engaging AI. Addressing this question requires consideration of the cognitive capacities that enable reflective, human, and ethically grounded engagement with intelligent technologies. These capacities are addressed by the Conscious Intelligence framework discussed in the following section.

Conscious Intelligence and Human–AI Engagement. The emergence of artificial intelligence has transformed human interaction with knowledge by enabling intelligent systems to participate in reasoning, information synthesis, decision support, and creative production. Consequently, effective engagement with AI requires more than technical competence or AI literacy; it requires the capacity to engage intelligent systems humanly, critically, and ethically while maintaining responsibility for one's own judgments and decisions. This challenge has prompted increasing recognition that successful human–AI interaction depends not only on advances in artificial intelligence but also on the development of distinctly human cognitive capacities that enable reflective engagement with AI (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022).

The Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework (CIIF) was developed to explain these higher-order human capacities in AI-mediated environments (Bull, 2026). Unlike conventional perspectives that emphasize technological proficiency or AI literacy, Conscious Intelligence conceptualizes AI engagement as a consciously regulated process in which individuals actively monitor, evaluate, and govern their interactions with intelligent systems. Rather than asking what AI can do, the framework asks how individuals can engage AI without relinquishing reflective judgment, ethical responsibility, or intellectual ownership of their decisions. Conscious Intelligence therefore complements technological capability by emphasizing human regulation of AI-assisted cognition.

The framework comprises five interrelated dimensions that collectively support responsible AI engagement. Reflective Awareness enables individuals to recognize how AI influences their thinking and decision-making. Discernment facilitates the critical evaluation of AI-generated information and distinguishes credible evidence from unsupported or misleading outputs. Metacognitive Regulation supports the deliberate monitoring and adjustment of cognitive strategies during AI interaction. Ethical Reasoning promotes consideration of fairness, accountability, transparency, and potential consequences when applying AI-generated recommendations. Finally, Epistemic Responsibility emphasizes intellectual accountability through source verification, acknowledgment of uncertainty, and responsible use of AI-generated knowledge (Bull, 2026). Together, these dimensions position the human user—not the AI system, as the ultimate authority over interpretation, judgment, and decision-making.

Within the context of the present paper, Conscious Intelligence serves a specific theoretical function. Whereas logotherapy explains why meaning and responsibility are essential to human existence, Conscious Intelligence explains how individuals consciously regulate AI engagement in ways that preserve reflective judgment and human decision-making. It therefore provides an important cognitive perspective for understanding human adaptation to AI-mediated environments.

However, Conscious Intelligence was developed to explain responsible AI engagement, not the broader question of how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while cognition is increasingly shared with intelligent systems. Consequently, although Conscious Intelligence identifies essential cognitive-regulatory capacities, it does not fully explain the broader existential phenomenon that emerges in AI-mediated environments. Addressing this broader question requires a theoretical perspective that extends beyond cognitive regulation to explain how individuals preserve authorship over their existence while engaging AI. The present paper proposes Existential Sovereignty Theory to address this unresolved phenomenon.

Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence: Designing AI for Human Development. The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has shifted scholarly attention from what intelligent systems can accomplish to how they should be designed to serve human needs. This transition has given rise to Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI), an interdisciplinary paradigm that emphasizes the development of AI systems that enhance rather than replace human capabilities. In contrast to technology-centered approaches that prioritize automation, computational efficiency, or algorithmic performance, HCAI positions human well-being, dignity, autonomy, and societal benefit as the primary objectives of AI design and deployment (Shneiderman, 2022). The central premise is that AI should augment human intelligence while preserving meaningful human control over consequential decisions.

International organizations and multidisciplinary research communities have reinforced this perspective by advocating principles of trustworthy and responsible AI. UNESCO's (2021) *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* emphasizes respect for human rights, human dignity, diversity, accountability, and human oversight, while the OECD (2019) AI Principles promote inclusive growth, transparency, robustness, and responsible stewardship of AI technologies. Similarly, Floridi et al. (2018) argue that AI governance should prioritize beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. Collectively, these frameworks have established a strong ethical and governance foundation for AI while recognizing that technological advancement should remain subordinate to human values and societal well-being.

More recently, HCAI scholarship has expanded beyond governance to emphasize human capability, digital well-being, and meaningful collaboration between humans and intelligent systems. Rather than evaluating AI solely through measures of accuracy or productivity, researchers increasingly argue that AI should strengthen learning, creativity, critical thinking, decision-making, and human development (Shneiderman, 2022). This perspective represents an important shift from viewing AI as an autonomous replacement for human expertise toward understanding AI as a collaborative partner that extends, rather than diminishes, uniquely human capacities.

Consistent with this emerging perspective, Bull (2026) proposed a Human-Centered AI framework that emphasizes preserving human judgment, cognitive independence, and ethical responsibility while leveraging AI to enhance learning, decision-making, and professional practice. Rather than measuring technological success solely by computational performance, the framework argues that AI should be evaluated according to its capacity to strengthen human capability without displacing human responsibility or agency. This perspective complements broader HCAI principles by emphasizing that technological advancement should ultimately expand human potential rather than substitute for distinctly human capacities.

Despite these advances, existing HCAI frameworks primarily address how AI systems should be designed, governed, and implemented. They provide comparatively less attention to the internal human processes through which individuals preserve meaning, identity, judgment, and responsibility while engaging intelligent systems. In other words, HCAI defines the conditions under which AI ought to operate, but it does not fully explain the human capacities required to remain the author of one's own existence within those environments. Consequently, understanding human adaptation to AI requires moving beyond system design toward a theory explaining how individuals preserve their humanity while increasingly sharing cognitive activities with intelligent technologies.

Together, the preceding theoretical perspectives establish the foundation for the present paper. Human flourishing identifies the desired outcome of optimal human functioning; logotherapy explains the centrality of meaning and responsibility; Conscious Intelligence explains the cognitive-regulatory capacities required for human AI engagement; and Human-Centered AI defines the technological context that supports responsible human development. However, none of these

perspectives independently explains how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable AI. The following section addresses this theoretical gap by introducing Existential Sovereignty Theory.

Integrative Synthesis of the Theoretical Foundations

The preceding review demonstrates that contemporary scholarship offers substantial insight into the conditions necessary for healthy human functioning in an increasingly technological society. Human flourishing provides a multidimensional understanding of optimal psychological and social functioning, emphasizing purpose, relationships, autonomy, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017). Logotherapy extends this understanding by identifying meaning, freedom, and responsibility as the existential foundations upon which flourishing depends (Frankl, 1963, 1988). Together, these perspectives establish that human well-being is not merely the absence of psychological distress but the realization of purposeful, responsible, and meaningful lives.

The review further demonstrates that advances in artificial intelligence require new perspectives on human adaptation. Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence emphasizes that AI should augment rather than replace human capabilities and that technological development should remain aligned with human dignity, autonomy, and societal well-being (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Complementing this perspective, the Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework explains the reflective, metacognitive, ethical, and epistemic capacities required for human engagement with AI (Bull, 2026). These contributions substantially advance understanding of responsible human–AI interaction by emphasizing both technological design and human cognitive regulation.

Despite these advances, an important conceptual gap remains. Existing theories largely explain different aspects of the human–AI relationship rather than the relationship. Human flourishing identifies the desired outcome of optimal human functioning but does not explain how flourishing is sustained when cognitive activities are increasingly shared with intelligent systems. Logotherapy explains why meaning remains indispensable to human existence but was developed before AI became an active participant in reasoning, communication, and decision-making. Human-Centered AI establishes principles for designing technologies that support human well-being but focuses primarily on system characteristics rather than the internal human capacities required for meaningful engagement. Similarly, Conscious Intelligence explains how individuals consciously regulate interactions with AI but does not explicitly address the broader existential challenge of preserving authorship over identity, purpose, values, and responsibility in AI-mediated environments.

Consequently, the central challenge is not adequately explained by any single existing theory. The emergence of increasingly capable AI has created conditions in which individuals continuously negotiate the boundaries between human judgment and machine-generated cognition. Questions concerning authorship, responsibility, identity, authenticity, and meaning have therefore become increasingly important, yet these issues remain dispersed across multiple theoretical traditions. Collectively, existing scholarship provides valuable insights into meaning, cognition, ethics, governance, and flourishing but stops short of explaining the overarching human capacity that enables individuals to remain the primary authors of their lives while engaging intelligent technologies.

The present paper addresses this theoretical gap by proposing Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST). Rather than replacing existing theories, EST builds upon their established contributions while explaining a phenomenon that none fully addresses independently. Specifically, EST seeks to explain how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence. In doing so, the theory extends contemporary discussions beyond responsible AI use or human flourishing alone toward a broader understanding of what it means to remain fully human within AI-mediated environments.

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST)

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into education, healthcare, professional practice, and everyday life has fundamentally altered the relationship between humans and technology. Unlike previous technological innovations that primarily extended physical or computational capabilities, contemporary AI increasingly participates in cognitive activities traditionally regarded as uniquely human, including reasoning, interpretation, decision support, creativity, and communication (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Russell & Norvig, 2021). As a result, individuals are no longer merely using technological tools; they are increasingly engaging in shared cognitive processes with intelligent systems. This transition raises an important theoretical question that existing scholarship has yet to address comprehensively: *What human capacity enables individuals to remain the primary authors of their lives while increasingly sharing cognition with artificial intelligence?*

Existing theoretical perspectives provide important but partial explanations. Positive psychology explains the characteristics of flourishing (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011), logotherapy explains the existential importance of meaning and responsibility (Frankl, 1988), human-centered AI establishes principles for designing technologies that augment rather than replace human capability (Shneiderman, 2022), and Conscious Intelligence explains the reflective and metacognitive capacities required for human AI engagement (Bull, 2026). However, none of these perspectives independently explains how individuals preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable AI systems. This unresolved phenomenon suggests that an additional theoretical construct may be necessary.

Before proposing such a construct, it is important to determine whether existing concepts already explain the phenomenon. Theory development requires conceptual parsimony; therefore, new constructs should be introduced only when existing concepts are demonstrably insufficient to account for an emerging phenomenon (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnis, 2011). The following comparison examines several closely related constructs to determine whether they adequately explain the preservation of human authorship under conditions of shared human–AI cognition.

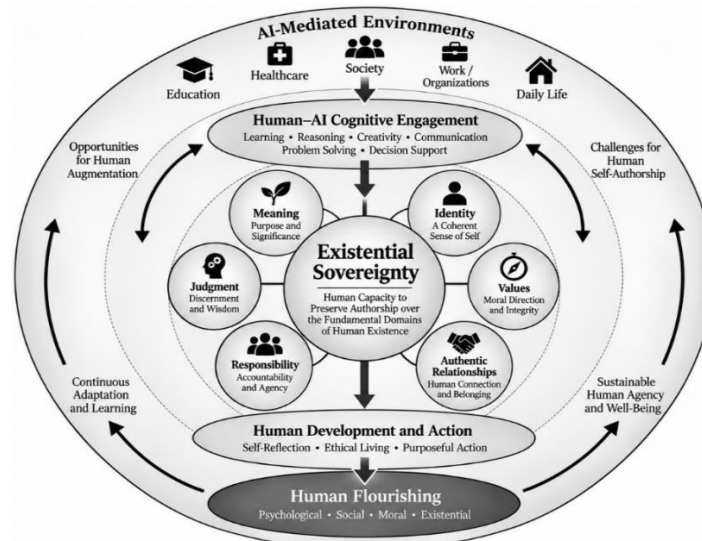
Figure 1 presents the conceptual structure of Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST). EST is a middle-range theory explaining how individuals preserve human authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence. The theory proposes that flourishing in AI-mediated environments depends not simply on technological capability but on the uniquely human capacity to retain authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships.

Rather than viewing artificial intelligence as inherently beneficial or harmful, EST adopts a human-centered perspective in which AI functions as a cognitive partner that augments—but does not replace—human cognition. The developmental consequences of AI therefore depend less on the capabilities of intelligent systems than on the individual's capacity to preserve authorship over the existential domains that define human life.

At the center of the model is Existential Sovereignty, defined as the human capacity to preserve authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence while engaging increasingly capable intelligent technologies. Existential Sovereignty does not imply independence from AI or resistance to technological advancement. Instead, it reflects the continuing capacity to determine meaning, maintain identity, exercise independent judgment, uphold personal values, assume responsibility, and cultivate authentic relationships while collaborating with intelligent systems.

As illustrated in Figure 1, AI-mediated environments create continuous opportunities for human–AI cognitive engagement that enhance learning, creativity, communication, and decision support while simultaneously requiring individuals to preserve authorship across the Domains of Human Authorship. Through the exercise of Existential Sovereignty, individuals translate these interactions into purposeful human development and action, ultimately contributing to sustained human flourishing.

Figure 1. Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST): A Model of Human Flourishing in AI-Mediated Environments



Note: *Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST).* The theory proposes that AI-mediated environments create continuous opportunities for human–AI cognitive engagement. Existential Sovereignty functions as the central human capacity that enables individuals to preserve human authorship while engaging intelligent systems.

The model begins with AI-mediated environments, representing the diverse educational, healthcare, organizational, professional, and social contexts in which intelligent technologies increasingly influence learning, communication, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making. As AI becomes embedded within everyday life, human interaction with intelligent systems shifts from occasional technological assistance to continuous cognitive collaboration. These environments create unprecedented opportunities for cognitive augmentation while simultaneously introducing new challenges concerning authorship, responsibility, identity, and the preservation of meaningful human existence.

Within these contexts, individuals engage in human–AI cognitive engagement, the ongoing process through which AI contributes to reasoning, information synthesis, creative production, communication, and decision support. Such engagement has the potential to enhance human capability by expanding access to knowledge, increasing efficiency, and supporting complex decisions. However, it also raises fundamental questions regarding ownership of thought, independent judgment, ethical responsibility, and authentic human agency. EST therefore recognizes human–AI cognitive engagement as both an opportunity for human development and a context requiring deliberate self-regulation.

At the center of the model is Existential Sovereignty, defined as the uniquely human capacity to preserve human authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence while engaging increasingly capable intelligent technologies. Existential Sovereignty does not imply independence from technology or resistance to artificial intelligence. Rather, it reflects the individual's continuing authority to determine purpose, interpret experience, exercise judgment, uphold personal values, assume responsibility, and cultivate authentic relationships despite increasingly collaborative interactions with AI. Intelligent systems may generate information, recommendations, analyses, or creative outputs, but responsibility for interpreting those contributions, integrating them into one's life, and acting upon them remains fundamentally human. Accordingly, Existential Sovereignty functions as the central regulatory mechanism through which individuals maintain ownership of their lives within AI-mediated environments.

The construct derives its conceptual foundation from existential philosophy and psychology, in which freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the search for meaning constitute defining characteristics of human existence (Frankl, 1963, 1988; Yalom, 1980). Within EST, however, these principles are extended to contemporary AI-mediated environments, where intelligent systems increasingly participate in cognitive activities traditionally regarded as uniquely human. The concept of sovereignty therefore refers not to isolation from technological influence but to the preservation of human stewardship over one's judgments, identity, values, and life direction despite continuous technological collaboration.

Existential Sovereignty is expressed through six interconnected Domains of Human Authorship: meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships. These domains are not independent psychological traits nor separate dimensions of flourishing. Rather, they represent the principal areas of human existence over which human authorship is exercised. Through these domains, individuals preserve purpose, maintain a coherent identity, evaluate information critically, align decisions with moral commitments, accept accountability for their actions, and sustain genuine human relationships. Collectively, the domains describe where Existential Sovereignty operates rather than defining the construct itself.

The preservation of authorship across these domains promotes human development, characterized by reflective learning, ethical growth, adaptive decision-making, and purposeful living. As individuals repeatedly exercise Existential Sovereignty during interactions with AI, they strengthen their capacity for reflective engagement and human self-direction. Conversely, uncritical dependence upon AI may weaken critical judgment, diminish personal responsibility, and reduce opportunities for authentic human development. EST therefore conceptualizes human development as a recursive process in which existential sovereignty shapes the quality of AI engagement while AI engagement continually influences opportunities for further development.

The ultimate outcome of the model is human flourishing, encompassing psychological, social, moral, and existential well-being. EST proposes that flourishing is neither an automatic consequence of technological advancement nor solely the product of individual motivation. Rather, flourishing emerges when individuals consistently preserve human authorship across the domains of human existence while engaging increasingly capable intelligent technologies. In this way, Existential Sovereignty serves as the central human mechanism linking AI-mediated environments with sustained human flourishing.

Comparing EST with Related Theoretical Constructs

As summarized in Table 1, existing theories explain important dimensions of human functioning, including agency, autonomous decision-making, meaning, authenticity, cognitive regulation, and human-centered technology. Collectively, these perspectives provide substantial insight into human behavior but do not fully explain a phenomenon increasingly characteristic of AI-mediated environments: the preservation of human authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while cognition is increasingly shared with intelligent systems. This conceptual gap provides the foundation for introducing Existential Sovereignty as a distinct theoretical construct.

Table 1: Comparison of Existential Sovereignty with Related Theoretical Constructs

Construct	Primary Focus	Contribution	Limitation Relative to AI-Mediated Human Authorship
Agency	Human action	Explains purposeful behavior and decision-making	Does not explain preservation of meaning, identity, and authorship during sustained AI collaboration.
Autonomy	Self-governance	Explains independent choice and freedom from external control	Emphasizes decision independence rather than ongoing co-cognition with intelligent systems.
Self-Determination	Intrinsic motivation and psychological needs	Explains motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness	Focuses on motivation rather than preservation of existential authorship.
Authenticity	Congruence between self and behavior	Explains living consistently with personal values and identity	Addresses self-expression but not AI-mediated judgment, cognition, or responsibility.
Identity	Self-concept	Explains personal and social identity formation	Describes who individuals are rather than how authorship is maintained during AI engagement.
Epistemic Agency	Ownership of knowledge and belief formation	Explains active evaluation and construction of knowledge	Limited primarily to knowledge processes rather than broader existential functioning.
Cognitive Liberty	Freedom over one's own mental processes	Protects cognitive freedom from external manipulation	Primarily a legal and neuroethical construct rather than a developmental or existential one.
Distributed Cognition	Cognition distributed across people and artifacts	Explains how cognitive work is shared among humans and technologies	Describes cognitive systems but does not address meaning, responsibility, identity, or flourishing.
Extended Cognition	External resources as components of cognition	Explains cognitive extension through tools and environments	Explains cognitive architecture rather than preservation of human authorship.
Existential Sovereignty (Proposed)	Preservation of authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging AI	Explains how individuals remain the primary authors of their lives under conditions of shared human–AI cognition	Integrates cognitive, existential, ethical, relational, and developmental dimensions into a unified theoretical construct.

Foundational Assumptions

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) is founded upon three assumptions concerning human nature, artificial intelligence, and human flourishing. These assumptions establish the philosophical and conceptual foundations of the theory and define the conditions under which Existential Sovereignty becomes necessary. They are not empirical propositions but foundational premises that guide the interpretation of the theoretical model.

Assumption 1. Human beings possess the capacity for human authorship. EST assumes that human beings are capable of humanly directing their lives through the continuous construction of meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships. Although these domains are influenced by biological, psychological, social, cultural, and technological factors, individuals remain the primary authors of their existence. Accordingly, flourishing depends upon preserving human authorship rather than relinquishing responsibility for one's life to external influences.

Assumption 2. Artificial intelligence increasingly participates in, but does not replace, human cognition. The theory assumes that contemporary artificial intelligence has become an active participant in learning, reasoning, creativity, communication, and decision-making. AI therefore functions as a cognitive partner capable of augmenting human capability. However, despite increasing sophistication, intelligent systems do not possess existential agency and cannot assume responsibility for meaning, moral judgment, personal identity, or authentic human relationships. These remain uniquely human capacities.

Assumption 3. Human flourishing depends upon preserving Existential Sovereignty within AI-mediated environments. EST assumes that the benefits of artificial intelligence are realized most fully when individuals preserve human authorship throughout their engagement with intelligent technologies. Human flourishing is therefore understood as neither an automatic consequence of technological advancement nor solely the product of individual motivation. Rather, flourishing emerges through the continuous exercise of Existential Sovereignty across the domains of human authorship as individuals learn, work, decide, create, and relate within increasingly AI-mediated environments.

Collectively, these assumptions establish the philosophical boundaries of EST. They position artificial intelligence as a powerful technological context, recognize human authorship as a uniquely human capacity, and identify Existential Sovereignty as the mechanism through which human flourishing is sustained in AI-mediated environments. The following section elaborates the Domains of Human Authorship, explaining the principal areas of human existence through which Existential Sovereignty is exercised

Domains of Human Authorship

Existential Sovereignty Theory proposes that human authorship is exercised through six interconnected Domains of Human Authorship. These domains do not constitute separate psychological traits or independent dimensions of flourishing. Rather, they represent the principal areas of human existence over which individuals retain authorship while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence. Together, the domains describe where Existential Sovereignty operates and how it is expressed in everyday life. Although analytically distinguishable, the domains are dynamically interconnected, such that changes within one domain influence functioning across the others.

Meaning. Meaning refers to the human capacity to interpret experience, establish purpose, and construct a coherent understanding of one's life. Within EST, meaning is not generated by artificial intelligence but by the individual through human reflection and lived experience. AI may provide information, generate ideas, or assist problem solving, but it cannot determine what is meaningful for a person's life. Existential Sovereignty preserves the individual's authority to define purpose, interpret experience, and pursue personally significant goals.

Identity. Identity represents the continuous development and preservation of a coherent sense of self. AI increasingly influences how individuals communicate, create, learn, and even present themselves to others. EST proposes that existential sovereignty enables individuals to integrate technological assistance without surrendering ownership of who they are. Identity therefore remains grounded in human values, experiences, and self-understanding rather than in algorithmically generated representations or external technological influence.

Judgment. Judgment refers to the reflective evaluation of information, alternatives, and potential actions. Although AI can generate recommendations, summarize evidence, and support complex decisions, the responsibility for evaluating those outputs remains human. Existential Sovereignty preserves independent reasoning by ensuring that individuals critically assess AI-generated information before incorporating it into decisions affecting themselves or others.

Values. Values constitute the moral and ethical principles that guide human decisions and behavior. AI systems may optimize efficiency or predict outcomes, but they cannot determine what individuals ought to value. EST therefore positions values as a distinctly human domain in which ethical commitments, cultural traditions, professional standards, and personal convictions continue to guide action. Existential Sovereignty enables individuals to ensure that AI-supported decisions remain consistent with their moral commitments rather than allowing technological capability to become the primary determinant of action.

Responsibility. Responsibility refers to personal accountability for decisions, actions, and their consequences. EST assumes that responsibility cannot be delegated to artificial intelligence, regardless of the sophistication of the technology. Individuals remain accountable for interpreting AI-generated recommendations, deciding whether to act upon them, and accepting the consequences of those decisions. Existential Sovereignty therefore preserves human accountability within increasingly collaborative human–AI relationships.

Authentic Relationships. Authentic relationships encompass genuine human connection characterized by empathy, trust, reciprocity, compassion, and mutual presence. Although AI may facilitate communication or provide social support, EST maintains that flourishing ultimately depends upon authentic interpersonal relationships grounded in human experience. Existential Sovereignty preserves the individual's capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships without allowing technologically mediated interactions to replace genuine human connection.

Collectively, these six domains represent the principal areas in which Existential Sovereignty is exercised. The domains are mutually reinforcing rather than independent. For example, values influence judgment, judgment shapes responsible action, responsibility contributes to identity, and meaningful relationships enrich purpose and personal development. Consequently, the preservation of human authorship requires maintaining authorship across all six domains rather than emphasizing one domain in isolation. As individuals engage AI across educational, professional, healthcare, and social contexts, Existential Sovereignty provides the integrative human capacity through which these domains remain aligned with human development and sustained flourishing. Table 2 below summarizes the domain of human authorship and their functions within EST.

Table 2: Domain of Human Authorship and Function Within EST

Domain of Human Authorship	Central Question	Function Within EST
Meaning	<i>Why do I choose this path?</i>	Preserves purpose and existential direction.
Identity	<i>Who am I becoming?</i>	Maintains a coherent and authentic sense of self.
Judgment	<i>What should I believe or decide?</i>	Ensures reflective evaluation of AI-assisted information and decisions.
Values	<i>What principles guide my choices?</i>	Aligns actions with ethical and moral commitments.
Responsibility	<i>For what am I accountable?</i>	Preserves personal ownership of decisions and their consequences.
Authentic Relationships	<i>How do I remain genuinely connected to others?</i>	Sustains empathy, trust, reciprocity, and meaningful human connection.

Dynamic Operation of Existential Sovereignty Theory

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) conceptualizes human flourishing as a dynamic, adaptive process that unfolds through continuous interaction between individuals and AI-mediated environments. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in education, healthcare, professional practice, communication, and everyday decision-making, individuals are required to repeatedly negotiate the appropriate relationship between human judgment and machine-supported cognition (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Rather than representing a fixed personal attribute, Existential Sovereignty is conceived as a continually exercised human capacity through which individuals preserve authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence while engaging intelligent technologies.

The dynamic process begins with human–AI cognitive engagement, in which individuals interact with AI to acquire information, generate ideas, support complex decisions, solve problems, and enhance creativity. Contemporary research demonstrates that AI can substantially augment human cognitive performance by improving access to knowledge, increasing efficiency, and expanding analytical capabilities (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Mollick, 2024). At the same time, scholars have cautioned that sustained reliance on AI may contribute to automation bias, cognitive offloading, diminished critical reflection, and increasing dependence on machine-generated outputs if individuals relinquish independent judgment and responsibility (Bender et al., 2021; Gerlich, 2025; Parasuraman & Riley, 1997). Consequently, AI-mediated engagement presents both developmental opportunities and existential challenges.

Within this context, Existential Sovereignty functions as the theory's central regulatory mechanism. Rather than passively accepting or rejecting AI-generated outputs, individuals actively interpret, evaluate, and integrate technological support through the Domains of Human Authorship. Meaning enables experiences to be interpreted within a broader sense of purpose (Frankl, 1988; Seligman, 2011). Identity preserves continuity of self despite increasing technological mediation (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Judgment supports reflective evaluation of AI-generated recommendations through critical reasoning and discernment (Bull, 2026; Kahneman, 2011). Values provide ethical direction by aligning technological choices with enduring moral commitments (Floridi et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Responsibility maintains personal accountability for decisions and their consequences (Frankl, 1963), while authentic relationships preserve empathy, trust, reciprocity, and meaningful human connection despite increasing interaction with intelligent systems (Ryff, 1989; VanderWeele, 2017). Collectively, these domains ensure that AI remains an instrument supporting human development rather than becoming the author of human thought, judgment, or action.

The operation of EST is inherently recursive and developmental. Every interaction with AI generates experiences that influence subsequent engagement. Individuals who consistently preserve Existential Sovereignty strengthen reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, adaptive learning, and responsible decision-making, thereby enhancing their capacity to collaborate effectively with intelligent technologies over time (Bull, 2026; Mezirow, 2018). Conversely, repeated reliance on AI without preserving human authorship may increase cognitive dependency, weaken independent judgment, diffuse responsibility, and diminish meaningful engagement with personal decisions and experiences (Gerlich, 2025; Risko & Gilbert, 2016). EST therefore proposes a continuous feedback cycle in which AI-mediated engagement shapes Existential Sovereignty, while Existential Sovereignty determines the quality and developmental consequences of future human–AI interactions. Through this ongoing process, individuals are positioned not merely as users of artificial intelligence but as the enduring authors of their own lives, thereby sustaining human flourishing in increasingly AI-mediated societies.

EST does not conceptualize artificial intelligence as an independent determinant of human flourishing. The same AI technologies may contribute either positively or negatively to human development depending upon the degree to which individuals maintain existential sovereignty during their engagement. AI therefore functions as a contextual catalyst rather than a causal agent. Human flourishing emerges not from technological sophistication alone but from the capacity of individuals to exercise human authorship while benefiting from AI-supported cognitive augmentation (VanderWeele & Teubner, 2026).

Finally, the theory recognizes that existential sovereignty is developmental and educable. Educational institutions, healthcare organizations, workplaces, and public policy can strengthen existential sovereignty by cultivating critical reflection, ethical reasoning, responsible AI engagement, meaningful dialogue, and opportunities for human development. Conversely, environments that encourage passive dependence upon intelligent systems without fostering human judgment or responsibility may gradually undermine the very capacities necessary for long-term flourishing. Accordingly, EST conceptualizes flourishing as an adaptive process sustained through continuous preservation of existential sovereignty across changing technological environments.

Theoretical Propositions

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) advances a series of propositions that describe the relationships among AI-mediated environments, existential sovereignty, human development, and human flourishing. These propositions are not presented as hypotheses for immediate statistical testing but as theoretical statements intended to guide future empirical research, instrument development, and practical application.

Proposition 1. AI-mediated environments increase the importance of Existential Sovereignty.

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly integrated into learning, work, healthcare, communication, and decision-making, individuals encounter more frequent situations requiring them to negotiate the relationship between human judgment and machine-generated cognition. Consequently, the capacity to preserve human authorship becomes increasingly important for maintaining human agency and responsibility.

Proposition 2. Existential Sovereignty regulates the quality of human–AI cognitive engagement.

Individuals possessing higher levels of Existential Sovereignty are more likely to engage AI humanly, critically, and responsibly rather than relying upon AI passively or uncritically. Conversely, diminished existential sovereignty increases vulnerability to cognitive dependence, reduced critical reflection, and diffusion of personal responsibility.

Proposition 3. Existential Sovereignty is expressed through multiple domains of human authorship.

The preservation of human authorship is manifested through six interrelated domains: meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships. Together, these domains represent the principal areas in which existential sovereignty is exercised during human–AI interaction.

Proposition 4. Human development strengthens Existential Sovereignty.

Educational experiences, reflective practice, ethical dialogue, meaningful relationships, and responsible engagement with AI contribute to the continuous development of existential sovereignty. Consequently, existential sovereignty is conceptualized as a developmental human capacity rather than a fixed personal characteristic.

Proposition 5. Existential Sovereignty mediates the relationship between AI engagement and human flourishing.

The effects of AI on human flourishing are not determined solely by the capabilities of intelligent systems but by the extent to which individuals preserve human authorship while engaging those systems. AI therefore contributes to flourishing when mediated by strong existential sovereignty and may undermine flourishing when existential sovereignty is diminished.

Proposition 6. Human flourishing emerges through sustained preservation of Existential Sovereignty.

Long-term psychological, social, moral, and existential flourishing is more likely when individuals consistently preserve authorship over meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while engaging increasingly capable intelligent technologies.

These propositions collectively position Existential Sovereignty Theory as a human-centered explanation of flourishing in AI-mediated environments. Rather than evaluating artificial intelligence solely according to technological performance or ethical governance, EST emphasizes the uniquely human capacity required to engage intelligent systems while preserving human authorship. The following discussion examines the theoretical contributions of EST, its implications for research and practice, and opportunities for future refinement and empirical validation.

II. DISCUSSION

The emergence of artificial intelligence has transformed not only the technological landscape but also the conditions under which individuals construct meaning, exercise judgment, develop identity, and engage with others. While existing scholarship has substantially advanced understanding of human flourishing, existential meaning, reflective cognition, and human-centered artificial intelligence, these perspectives have generally addressed these phenomena independently. Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) contributes to this evolving body of scholarship by integrating these perspectives into a unified explanation of how individuals preserve human authorship while engaging increasingly capable intelligent technologies. Rather than focusing primarily on what AI can accomplish, EST redirects attention to the human capacities required to ensure that technological advancement strengthens rather than diminishes human flourishing.

The discussion interprets the theoretical contributions of EST, situates the theory within existing scholarship, examines its implications for research and practice, acknowledges its limitations, and identifies priorities for future investigation. Collectively, these considerations position EST as a human-centered framework for understanding the relationship between artificial intelligence and human flourishing in an era of continuous human–AI cognitive engagement.

Theoretical Contribution of Existential Sovereignty Theory

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly influential partner in human learning, decision-making, communication, creativity, and professional practice. Existing scholarship has substantially advanced understanding of human flourishing (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017), existential meaning and responsibility through logotherapy (Frankl, 1963, 1988), human-centered artificial intelligence emphasizing human agency, autonomy, and responsible technology design (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021), and reflective human cognition through the Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework (Bull, 2026). However, these perspectives have generally examined these dimensions independently and do not fully explain how individuals preserve authorship over the fundamental domains of human existence while increasingly sharing cognitive activities with intelligent systems. EST addresses this theoretical gap by integrating these complementary traditions into a unified explanation of human flourishing in AI-mediated environments.

The principal contribution of EST is the introduction of Existential Sovereignty as a distinct theoretical construct. Unlike established concepts such as agency, autonomy, authenticity, or epistemic agency, Existential Sovereignty explains the broader human capacity to retain authorship over the fundamental domains of existence, including meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships, within AI-mediated environments. The theory therefore extends existing scholarship beyond questions of technological capability or ethical governance by focusing on the preservation of human authorship as the central mechanism linking artificial intelligence with long-term human flourishing.

A second contribution of EST is its repositioning of artificial intelligence within theories of human development. Much contemporary AI scholarship evaluates intelligent systems according to accuracy, efficiency, transparency, fairness, or safety. Although these considerations remain essential, EST argues that technological performance alone cannot explain whether AI ultimately contributes to or diminishes human flourishing. Instead, the theory proposes that AI functions as a contextual influence whose developmental consequences depend largely on the individual's capacity to preserve human authorship. This perspective shifts scholarly attention from evaluating AI systems alone toward understanding the human capacities required for responsible and flourishing engagement with intelligent technologies.

Third, EST extends contemporary discussions of human flourishing into AI-mediated environments. Existing models of flourishing have emphasized psychological well-being, purpose, positive relationships, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; VanderWeele, 2017). EST does not replace these perspectives but proposes a mechanism through which flourishing may be sustained under conditions of increasing technological collaboration. Specifically, the theory suggests that flourishing emerges through the continuous preservation of Existential Sovereignty as individuals navigate educational, organizational, healthcare, and social environments increasingly shaped by AI.

Finally, EST contributes to the broader human-centered AI literature by complementing rather than competing with existing frameworks. Human-Centered AI emphasizes the design of technologies that support human dignity, autonomy, and well-being (Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, the Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework emphasizes reflective awareness, ethical reasoning, metacognitive regulation, discernment, and epistemic responsibility during AI engagement (Bull, 2026). EST builds upon these contributions by proposing a broader explanatory framework that positions human authorship as the central human capacity through which these cognitive and ethical processes contribute to sustained flourishing. Rather than replacing existing theories, EST integrates them into a coherent conceptual explanation of human development within AI-mediated environments.

Altogether, these contributions position Existential Sovereignty Theory as a human-centered framework for understanding the relationship between artificial intelligence and human flourishing. By identifying human authorship as the central mechanism through which individuals preserve meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships, the theory broadens contemporary discussions of AI beyond technological capability toward the enduring question of what it means to remain fully human in an age of intelligent machines.

Relationship to Existing Theories

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) is not intended to replace existing theories of human development, meaning, or artificial intelligence. Rather, it integrates complementary perspectives to explain a phenomenon that has become increasingly salient in AI-mediated environments: the preservation of human authorship during sustained human–AI cognitive engagement. In doing so, EST extends several established theoretical traditions while maintaining their distinct conceptual contributions.

EST builds upon logotherapy by affirming that meaning, freedom, and responsibility remain central to human existence (Frankl, 1963, 1988). Frankl argued that individuals retain the freedom to choose their attitudes and assume responsibility for their lives even under the most difficult circumstances. EST extends this perspective to contemporary AI-mediated environments by proposing that the challenge is no longer limited to responding to adversity but also includes preserving authorship over meaning and responsibility while intelligent technologies increasingly participate in reasoning, communication, and decision-making. Thus, EST expands the existential context of logotherapy without altering its foundational principles.

The theory similarly complements positive psychology and human flourishing frameworks. Models proposed by Ryff (1989), Seligman (2011), and VanderWeele (2017) identify flourishing as a multidimensional state characterized by purpose, positive relationships, personal growth, autonomy, and psychological well-being. EST accepts flourishing as the

desired developmental outcome but contributes a theoretical explanation for how flourishing may be sustained under conditions of continuous AI engagement. Rather than redefining flourishing, EST identifies Existential Sovereignty as the human capacity through which flourishing can be preserved as cognition becomes increasingly distributed across human and intelligent technological systems.

EST also extends scholarship in Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI). Existing HCAI frameworks emphasize designing intelligent systems that enhance human dignity, autonomy, transparency, fairness, and well-being (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). These frameworks primarily address the design, governance, and ethical deployment of AI systems. EST complements this work by focusing on the human participant rather than the technology itself. Specifically, the theory explains the internal human capacities required to engage AI responsibly, thereby shifting attention from human-centered system design to human-centered existential development within AI-mediated environments.

A particularly important relationship exists between EST and the Conscious Intelligence Integration Framework (CIIF) (Bull, 2026). CIIF explains the cognitive-regulatory processes that enable individuals to engage AI through reflective awareness, discernment, metacognitive regulation, ethical reasoning, and epistemic responsibility. EST incorporates these capacities within a broader existential framework. Whereas CIIF primarily addresses how individuals consciously regulate AI engagement, EST addresses why that regulation matters for preserving human authorship and sustaining human flourishing. Consequently, the two frameworks are complementary rather than competing. Conscious Intelligence may be understood as supporting the cognitive and ethical processes through which Existential Sovereignty is exercised across the Domains of Human Authorship.

Finally, EST contributes to contemporary theory by integrating existential psychology, positive psychology, educational theory, and human-centered AI into a unified explanation of human development within AI-mediated environments. Existing theories explain meaning, flourishing, cognition, or responsible AI engagement independently. EST advances the literature by positioning human authorship as the central mechanism linking these perspectives into a coherent theoretical framework. In doing so, it provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research examining how individuals preserve their humanity while collaborating with increasingly capable intelligent technologies.

Practical Implications

The value of a conceptual theory is ultimately demonstrated by its capacity to inform practice. Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) extends beyond a theoretical explanation of human flourishing in AI-mediated environments by offering a human-centered framework for guiding educational practice, healthcare, organizational leadership, artificial intelligence design, and public policy. Across these domains, the theory emphasizes that technological advancement should be accompanied by the human development of the human capacities necessary to preserve self-authorship, ethical responsibility, and meaningful human flourishing.

Education. The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence is transforming teaching, learning, assessment, and knowledge creation. Educational institutions have appropriately focused on AI literacy, digital competence, and academic integrity; however, EST suggests that these efforts should be complemented by human development of the human capacities required to engage AI responsibly. Instruction should therefore cultivate reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, critical evaluation of AI-generated information, purposeful learning, and authentic intellectual engagement. Within this perspective, educational success is measured not only by students' ability to use AI effectively but also by their capacity to remain the principal authors of their own learning, reasoning, and intellectual development.

Healthcare. Artificial intelligence is increasingly supporting diagnosis, clinical decision-making, documentation, predictive analytics, and personalized medicine. While these technologies offer significant opportunities to improve healthcare quality and efficiency, EST emphasizes that clinical judgment, ethical deliberation, compassion, and accountability remain fundamentally human responsibilities. Healthcare professionals should therefore be prepared not only to interpret AI-supported recommendations but also to exercise independent professional judgment, communicate transparently with patients, and preserve human dignity within technologically enhanced care. In this context, AI augments clinical expertise but does not replace professional responsibility or the therapeutic relationship.

Organizations and Leadership. Organizations across public and private sectors increasingly rely on AI to support strategic planning, performance management, recruitment, risk assessment, and operational decision-making. EST suggests that

effective leadership requires preserving human responsibility while leveraging AI as a decision-support resource. Leaders should promote organizational cultures that encourage reflective decision-making, ethical accountability, transparency, and responsible AI governance rather than passive reliance on algorithmic recommendations. Such environments strengthen both organizational resilience and public trust by ensuring that final accountability remains with human decision-makers.

Artificial Intelligence Design. EST complements Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence by emphasizing that intelligent systems should strengthen rather than diminish human authorship. Developers should design AI applications that encourage reflection, explainability, user autonomy, and informed decision-making rather than fostering excessive automation or cognitive dependency. Features that promote transparency, uncertainty communication, user verification, and meaningful human oversight are consistent with the principles of Existential Sovereignty because they reinforce the user's role as the ultimate author of decisions and actions.

Public Policy. The societal implications of AI extend beyond technological regulation to the preservation of human capability and democratic participation. EST suggests that AI policies should promote human development alongside innovation by supporting education, ethical AI governance, digital literacy, transparency, and accountability. Policymakers should consider not only whether AI systems are technically safe and effective but also whether they strengthen or weaken the human capacities necessary for responsible citizenship, meaningful participation, and long-term societal flourishing. Policies that preserve opportunities for human judgment, ethical deliberation, and authentic social relationships are therefore consistent with the broader objectives of human-centered AI governance.

Collectively, these implications position Existential Sovereignty Theory as a practical framework for guiding responsible AI integration across multiple sectors. Rather than viewing AI solely as a technological innovation, EST encourages organizations, educators, healthcare professionals, developers, and policymakers to evaluate AI according to its capacity to preserve human authorship and promote sustained human flourishing. In doing so, the theory broadens discussions of responsible AI beyond system performance toward the development of the human capacities required to thrive within increasingly AI-mediated societies.

Limitations

As a conceptual theory, Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) represents an initial effort to explain how individuals preserve human authorship while engaging increasingly capable artificial intelligence. Although the theory integrates perspectives from existential psychology, human flourishing, Conscious Intelligence, and Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence into a unified conceptual framework, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, EST is presently a conceptual rather than empirically validated theory. The proposed constructs, Domains of Human Authorship, and theoretical propositions have been derived through conceptual synthesis and theoretical integration rather than direct empirical investigation. Consequently, the explanatory relationships proposed in the model require systematic empirical examination across diverse populations and contexts before their validity can be established.

Second, the theory was developed within the context of contemporary generative AI and AI-assisted cognitive engagement. As artificial intelligence continues to evolve, future technological capabilities may introduce forms of human–AI interaction that extend beyond those considered in the present framework. Accordingly, EST should be regarded as an evolving theory that may require refinement as AI systems become increasingly autonomous, adaptive, and integrated into everyday life.

Third, EST assumes that human authorship remains both possible and desirable across AI-mediated environments. Although this assumption is consistent with existential psychology and human-centered AI, the theory does not fully examine how structural inequalities, institutional constraints, economic pressures, or cultural differences may influence individuals' opportunities to exercise Existential Sovereignty. Future theoretical refinement should therefore consider contextual factors that may strengthen or constrain human authorship across different societies and organizational settings.

Fourth, the theory focuses primarily on the human dimensions of AI engagement rather than on the technical characteristics of AI systems. While this human-centered orientation represents one of the principal contributions of EST, the theory is not intended to replace existing research on algorithmic fairness, explainability, transparency, robustness, or AI governance. Instead, EST should be viewed as complementary to these technological and policy-oriented frameworks by explaining the human capacities required for responsible engagement with intelligent systems.

Finally, although EST proposes that preserving human authorship contributes to human flourishing, the present theory does not specify the relative influence of each Domain of Human Authorship or the potential interactions among them. These relationships remain conceptual and require empirical investigation. Future studies may demonstrate that some domains exert stronger influences than others or that their importance varies across educational, healthcare, organizational, and cultural contexts.

Recognizing these limitations strengthens rather than diminishes the present theory. EST is offered as a foundational conceptual framework intended to stimulate scholarly dialogue, empirical investigation, and interdisciplinary collaboration concerning the preservation of human flourishing within increasingly AI-mediated societies.

Future Research

Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) provides a conceptual foundation for a broad and interdisciplinary research agenda examining human flourishing in AI-mediated environments. As an initial theoretical framework, EST invites empirical refinement, theoretical expansion, and practical application across diverse disciplines. Future research should focus on validating the proposed constructs, examining the dynamic relationships specified in the theory, and evaluating interventions designed to strengthen Existential Sovereignty in educational, healthcare, organizational, and societal contexts.

A primary research priority is the development and psychometric validation of an Existential Sovereignty Scale (ESS). Such an instrument would enable researchers to operationalize Existential Sovereignty as a measurable construct and examine its reliability, validity, and factorial structure across diverse populations. Guided by the six Domains of Human Authorship—meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships—the ESS could provide a standardized measure for investigating individual differences in human authorship during AI engagement and facilitate comparative studies across educational, professional, and cultural settings.

Future studies should also examine the theoretical propositions advanced by EST using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research designs. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies could evaluate whether Existential Sovereignty predicts psychological, social, moral, and existential flourishing beyond existing measures of AI literacy, digital competence, or technological acceptance. Structural equation modeling may be particularly useful for examining the mediating role of Existential Sovereignty in the relationship between human–AI cognitive engagement and human flourishing, while qualitative investigations could provide deeper insight into how individuals experience and preserve self-authorship during sustained interaction with intelligent technologies.

Cross-cultural research represents another important direction for theory development. Meaning, identity, responsibility, and authentic relationships are shaped by cultural, social, and institutional contexts that may influence how Existential Sovereignty is expressed. Comparative studies across countries, professions, educational systems, and organizational environments would help determine the universality of the proposed model while identifying cultural variations that may refine or extend the theory.

Intervention research offers an additional opportunity to translate EST into practice. Educational institutions, healthcare organizations, and workplaces could design and evaluate programs that humanly strengthen reflective judgment, ethical reasoning, purposeful learning, responsible AI engagement, and authentic interpersonal relationships. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies could examine whether such interventions enhance Existential Sovereignty and improve outcomes related to professional performance, ethical decision-making, psychological well-being, resilience, and long-term human flourishing.

Future research should also explore the relationship between EST and other emerging frameworks in artificial intelligence and human development. In particular, empirical studies may examine how **Conscious Intelligence** supports the exercise of Existential Sovereignty during AI-mediated engagement, whether Human-Centered AI design principles strengthen opportunities for human authorship, and how organizational policies and governance structures influence the preservation of the Domains of Human Authorship. Such investigations would clarify the complementary roles of these frameworks and contribute to a more integrated understanding of responsible human–AI collaboration.

Finally, as artificial intelligence continues to evolve, EST should remain an adaptive and developing theory. Future conceptual work may refine the proposed domains, identify additional contextual influences, or examine new forms of human–AI interaction that emerge with advances in autonomous systems, embodied AI, and multimodal intelligent

technologies. Accordingly, the present theory should be viewed not as a final explanation but as a foundation for an ongoing program of interdisciplinary scholarship dedicated to understanding how individuals preserve human authorship and flourish within increasingly AI-mediated societies.

III. CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is reshaping how individuals learn, work, communicate, create, and make decisions. As intelligent technologies become increasingly integrated into everyday life, scholarly attention has appropriately focused on technological capability, ethical governance, and human-centered design. Comparatively less attention, however, has been given to the human capacity required to preserve meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships while cognition is increasingly shared with intelligent systems. This paper addressed that conceptual gap by proposing Existential Sovereignty Theory (EST) as a human-centered explanation of flourishing within AI-mediated environments.

EST advances contemporary scholarship by introducing Existential Sovereignty as the central human capacity through which individuals preserve human authorship while engaging artificial intelligence. Rather than conceptualizing AI as either a replacement for human cognition or merely a technological tool, the theory positions AI as a cognitive partner whose contribution to human development depends upon the individual's ability to remain the principal author of his or her own life. Through the Domains of Human Authorship, meaning, identity, judgment, values, responsibility, and authentic relationships, EST explains how individuals maintain ownership over the aspects of existence that ultimately define human flourishing.

The theory also contributes to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue among existential psychology, positive psychology, human-centered artificial intelligence, education, healthcare, organizational leadership, and technology ethics. By integrating these perspectives into a coherent conceptual framework, EST extends existing scholarship beyond discussions of AI capability or governance toward the broader question of how technological progress can remain aligned with enduring human purposes and values. In doing so, the theory complements rather than replaces established perspectives on meaning, flourishing, Conscious Intelligence, and responsible AI engagement.

As artificial intelligence continues to evolve, the central challenge may no longer be whether machines become more intelligent, but whether human beings continue to exercise human authorship over their own lives. Technological advancement alone cannot determine what is meaningful, morally responsible, or worthy of human commitment. Those remain fundamentally human responsibilities. EST therefore proposes that the long-term promise of artificial intelligence will be realized not through increasingly autonomous machines alone, but through the continued development of individuals capable of preserving human authorship while engaging those technologies responsibly.

Ultimately, Existential Sovereignty Theory is offered not as a final explanation but as a foundation for continued interdisciplinary scholarship. Future empirical research, conceptual refinement, and practical application will determine the theory's explanatory power across educational, healthcare, organizational, and societal contexts. If the central premise of EST is supported, preserving Existential Sovereignty may become one of the defining challenges of human flourishing in the age of artificial intelligence.

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