
CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN NATURE AND TRANSHUMANISM BRIDGING ANCIENT WISDOM WITH FUTURE EVOLUTION

Dong Tai Nguyen*

*Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, 59 Lang Ha street, Ba Dinh district,
Hanoi, Vietnam*

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Abstract

The paper delves into the intricate relationship between Confucianism and the concept of transhumanism. While transhumanism seeks to transcend human biological limitations through technological advancements, Confucianism offers philosophical perspectives on human nature and its potential evolution. The research juxtaposes these two paradigms, highlighting how ancient Confucian values can inform modern debates on transhumanism's ethical implications. By drawing parallels between Confucian ideals of self-cultivation and the goals of transhumanism, the study illuminates potential synergies and conflicts. The analysis underscores the importance of integrating traditional philosophical frameworks when addressing contemporary technological challenges, ensuring that the pursuit of human enhancement remains grounded in ethical considerations.

Keywords: nature, technological, advancements, ethical, implications

1. Introduction

In the epoch of rapid technological advancements, the dialogue between ancient philosophical paradigms and modern scientific aspirations gains paramount importance. This paper seeks to bridge the millennia-old Confucian values with the contemporary movement of transhumanism, a field advocating for the transcendence of human biological limitations. While transhumanism is rooted in technological progression, Confucianism provides profound insights into the essence of human nature, allowing for a rich discourse on the implications of merging humanity with machinery.

The significance of this research lies in its unique juxtaposition of two seemingly disparate fields, shedding light on how time-tested philosophies can guide the ethical trajectory of cutting-edge technologies. Methodologically, this

*E-mail: ntaidong@yahoo.com

study employs a comparative analysis, drawing parallels and distinctions between Confucian teachings and transhumanist objectives. Subsequent sections delve deeper into the intricacies of both domains, elucidating their convergences and divergences, culminating in a holistic understanding of their interplay in the context of humanity's future evolution.

2. Transhumanism

2.1. Definition

Transhumanism, in its broadest sense, is an intellectual movement aimed at transcending human biological constraints. It advocates the application of biotechnological advancements to modify and improve human nature, ultimately transforming humanity into a distinct species. This transformative agenda encompasses the shifting of evolutionary control from natural selection to conscious decision-making, targeting the eradication of suffering and amplifying human autonomy. The movement envisions milestones such as achieving immortality and a comprehensive transformation of human nature. Pioneering technologies underpinning transhumanism encompass nanotechnology, gene therapy, stem cells, neural interfaces, and tissue engineering. In its ultimate realization, transhumanism posits a future where humans might transcend physical constraints, vastly improving life expectancy, cognitive abilities, and resistance to diseases, potentially even conquering death itself.

'Transhuman' serves as an intermediate stage between current humans and the envisioned post-humans, characterized by capabilities that surpass contemporary human potential, laying the groundwork for the advent of post-humanism.

2.2. Historical and philosophical underpinnings

The existential question arises: why aspire for human-machine convergence? The answer lies in the quest to transcend human vulnerabilities, particularly the inevitability of death. The age-old human yearning for extended life, enhanced health and superior intellectual capacities is not novel. However, the contemporary epoch marks a departure in that science and technology appear poised to actualize these aspirations.

The philosophical antecedents of transhumanism trace back to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's seminal 1486 work, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* [1], which refers to man as "a creature neither of Heaven nor of Earth, neither mortal nor immortal" prompting humans to "rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine" [2]. Mirandola's assertion that humans need to ascend to divine realms resonates with Dante's use of 'transumanar' (meaning 'to transcend the human condition') in 'Divina Commedia - Paradiso', signifying human transcendence [2].

Julian Huxley, an evolutionary biologist, officially coined the term ‘transhumanism’ in 1957. Huxley’s writings capture the essence of transhumanism, emphasizing humanity’s ability to self-evolve and transcend current forms and nature: “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature” [3]. This thought contains the core idea of transhumanism, that humans are always seeking self-evolution beyond their existing form and nature and are capable of transcendence.

In 2009, Nick Bostrom wrote an article titled ‘Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up’ (republished in 2013) [4]. Bostrom, co-founder of the World Transhumanist Association and professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, leads the Future of Humanity Institute. Bostrom champions transhumanism as an extension of secular humanism and the Enlightenment, anchored in the belief that human nature is amenable to enhancement through rational methodologies and applied sciences. He considers transhumanism to be “an outgrowth of secular humanism and the Enlightenment. It holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods.” [5]

In the section ‘Journey Through the Transhumanist Galaxy’, Roberto Manzocco [2, p. 45-57] mentions some of the main groups and organizations of transhumanism that have emerged over the years:

- a) *Humanity+*: Initially the World Transhumanist Association, it champions transhumanism in political and academic spheres. The first manifesto of the Transhumanist group on the ‘Humanism +’ page proclaims: “Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by Science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.” [*Humanity+*, *The Transhumanist Declaration*, 2012, <https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-declaration>, accessed on 27.06.2023)].
- b) *The Extropy Institute*: Founded in the early ‘90s, it dissolved in 2006 due to unmet objectives.
- c) *The Terasem Movement*: Seeks to forge a ‘trans-religion’ premised on self-replicating machines.
- d) *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*: An affiliate of *Humanity+*, it publishes the *Journal of Evolution and Technology*.
- e) *Future of Humanity Institute*: Aligned with the University of Oxford, it addresses the implications of technological advancements.
- f) *Methuselah and SENS Research Foundations*: Both founded by Aubrey De Gray, they explore avenues to prolong human life.
- g) *Foresight Institute*: Advocates for nano research, biotechnology and longevity.

- h) *Center for Responsible Nanotechnology*: Analyses the socio-ethical dimensions of nanotechnology.
- i) *Machine Intelligence Research Institute*: Aims to cultivate benign artificial intelligence.
- j) *Singularity University*: Offers specialized courses to further transhumanist objectives.

Several other organizations are also instrumental in shaping the transhumanist landscape, including the Acceleration Studies Foundation, Alcor and Her Sisters, Ascender Alliance, and Biocurious & Co, among others.

3. Implications of transhumanism on human nature and religious traditions

While transhumanism offers promising prospects such as enhanced longevity, emotional wellbeing and heightened intelligence, it also introduces complex philosophical quandaries, especially when viewed through the prism of human nature and religious traditions. As Julian Huxley opined, as humanity seeks to transcend and realize new potentialities, it inadvertently delves into multifaceted challenges inherent to human nature. Huxley believed that humanity can and should rise above itself “by realizing new possibilities” of human nature [3, p. 13-17]. That raises many problems from the perspective of understanding human nature.

3.1. The conundrum of immortality

Transhumanism’s quest for immortality intersects with deeply entrenched religious beliefs, potentially unsettling the foundational tenets of many faiths. The attainment of immortality by post-humans may necessitate a re-evaluation of religious doctrines, posing existential challenges to their core teachings.

1. ***Religions Emphasizing Reincarnation***: Several religious traditions, predominantly those with roots in the Indian subcontinent, postulate a cyclical nature of life. These beliefs revolve around the concept of reincarnation, where the deeds (karma) of one’s current life shape the circumstances of the next existence. Transhumanism, with its potential to constantly alter post-human nature both biologically and cognitively, complicates this soteriological framework. As post-humans evolve and undergo myriad transformations, the very essence of their identity may fragment into multiple personas or identities within a single lifespan. Consequently, the doctrinal tenet that one’s actions determine their future life becomes problematic. How can one’s karma be ascertained if their existence embodies multiple personas with differing desires, decisions and dispositions?
2. ***Monotheistic Faiths and Singular Existence***: The Abrahamic religions, typified by Christianity, advocate the belief in a singular human life, followed by judgment based on one’s earthly actions determining their

eternal fate. If transhumanism facilitates prolonged or indefinite lifespans, this religious paradigm faces an ideological impasse similar to its reincarnation-centred counterparts. The notion of final judgment becomes ambiguous in the context of an indefinitely extended or immortal life.

This may lead us to the conclusion that the transhumanist vision, while optimistic and future-oriented, challenges deeply rooted spiritual and philosophical notions. It calls into question established religious beliefs, necessitating a profound introspective analysis of human essence, morality and the very nature of existence.

3.2. Bioethical implications and the question of human dignity

The philosophy of transhumanism inevitably propels us into a profound debate concerning human dignity. It raises pivotal questions: is there an inherent, divine cause to human existence? What defines human transcendence and how does one achieve it? Where do we delineate the boundaries between humans, animals and other entities that seem both analogous yet distinct from human beings? In essence, the pressing conundrum seeks to define human nature and determine the essence that differentiates humans from other entities.

Francis Fukuyama, in his critique of transhumanism, delves into the transformative possibilities offered by advancements in various scientific realms such as neurosciences, genomics, Robotics, Nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence [6]. These advancements envision a future where humans can enhance their cognitive and physical faculties, retard the aging process, and modulate their mental and emotional states. Such a future would empower individuals to consciously select their intrinsic qualities, and even those of their offspring. While, at first blush, this appears to be a utopian dream of life lived with unprecedented abundance, Fukuyama vehemently denounces this transhumanist aspiration, dubbing it “the most dangerous idea in the world” [6, p. 42-23].

In opposition, Nick Bostrom challenges Fukuyama’s assertions, identifying three foundational assumptions in Fukuyama’s argument: “His argument thus depends on three assumptions: (1) there is a unique ‘human essence’; (2) only those individuals who have this mysterious essence can have intrinsic value and deserve equal rights; and (3) the enhancements that transhumanists advocate would eliminate this essence. From this, he infers that the transhumanist project would destroy the basis of equal rights.” [N. Bostrom, *Transhumanism: The World’s Most Dangerous Idea?*, 2004, <https://nickbostrom.com/papers/dangerous>, accessed on 27.06.2023]

Bostrom asserts that the proposition that only entities with the ‘human essence’ can hold intrinsic value is fundamentally flawed. Arguing from a broader ethical standpoint, Bostrom suggests that many would recognize the welfare of certain non-human animals as being intrinsically valuable. He further posits that if an extraterrestrial being, equipped with consciousness and moral agency akin to humans, were to visit Earth, it would be morally reprehensible to

deny such an entity moral status or intrinsic value based merely on an absence of the so-called 'human essence'. Analogously, if certain individuals opted to modify their biology, thereby altering their 'essence' as per Fukuyama's definition, would it be just to strip them of their moral and legal rights? Bostrom concludes by equating the exclusion of individuals from the moral compass on the basis of differing 'essence' with discriminatory practices rooted in gender or skin colour. "Similarly, if some persons were to modify their own biology in a way that alters whatever Fukuyama judges to be their 'essence', would we really want to deprive them of their moral standing and legal rights? Excluding people from the moral circle merely because they have a different 'essence' from 'the rest of us' is akin to excluding people on basis of their gender or the color of their skin." [<https://nickbostrom.com/papers/dangerous>] In summation, as transhumanism begins to reshape humanity's trajectory, the discourse around human dignity and essence becomes increasingly crucial. Both Fukuyama's reservations and Bostrom's counterarguments underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of what truly constitutes human nature in the age of transformative biotechnological advancements.

3.3. Evolutionary considerations and the quest for equality

Advancing the discourse on transhumanism and post-human futures, the perspective of John Harris, a leading British bioethicist, further intensifies the debate. Hauskeller analyses Harris' position and claims that Harris posits the imperative for humanity to "take control of evolution and our future development to the point, and indeed beyond the point, where we humans will have changed, perhaps into a new and certainly into a better species altogether" [7].

Transhumanism can be conceptualized, from one viewpoint, as a neo-Darwinian paradigm, acting as an embodiment of artificial selection. While Darwin's theory of evolution underscores the mechanism of natural selection, transhumanism can be seen as its technological counterpart, where technological interventions supersede the organic processes of evolution. Such a perspective underscores the inherent inequality in artificial selection. Consider, for instance, the use of genetic modifications or neural implants to enhance the intellectual faculties of a child, positioning them at an advantage over their peers. Such interventions, driven by the desire for superiority, not only breed inequality but also erode the very socio-cultural fabric that binds humanity. This leads to an interpretation of transhumanism as a manifestation of consumerism, albeit of a different ilk. Here, consumerism is not merely characterized by monetary transactions leading to materialistic gratification. Instead, it extends to encompass a profound alteration of the human form, recalibrating humanity's relationship with its environment, particularly in terms of perception.

In light of such profound implications, it becomes imperative to scrutinize transhumanism not just as a technological endeavour but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon that challenges the traditional precepts of human nature, evolution and societal equality.

4. Confucian perspectives on human nature

4.1. Confucius and his conceptualization of human nature

In the renowned work ‘Nan Hua Jing’ by Chuang Tzu, a vivid illustration elucidates the juxtaposition between human beings and mechanical contrivances. This is narrated through Zi Gong, a disciple of Confucius. Upon observing an elderly gardener laboriously watering his crops, Zi Gong presented a mechanized alternative capable of efficiently irrigating numerous plots in a day. To his astonishment, the gardener responded with indignation, stating: “I have heard from my teacher that, ‘where there are ingenious contrivances, there are sure to be subtle doings; and that, where there are subtle doings, there is sure to be a scheming mind’. But, when there is a scheming mind in the breast, its pure simplicity is impaired. When this pure simplicity is impaired, the spirit becomes unsettled, and the unsettled spirit is not the proper residence of the Dao. It is not that I do not know (the contrivance which you mention), but I should be ashamed to use it.” [8] The essence of this parable revolves around the Dao - the ultimate truth or the transcendental. The narrative suggests that an excessive reliance on external, artificial means detracts individuals from the Dao. True alignment with the Dao is achieved not through external advancements but through introspective reconciliation with one’s innate nature and its harmony with the Universe.

Direct references to human nature in Confucian texts are rare. Yet, in one instance, Confucius proclaims, “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart” (性相近也, 習相遠也) [Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu 論語)*, <https://ctext.org/analects/zh>, accessed on 27.06.2023]. This statement, albeit concise, bears profound implications: it underscores the inherent similarity in human nature and acknowledges its malleability. The inherent sameness of human nature provides a foundation for universal equality, devoid of distinctions based on societal position, wealth, or intellectual capacities. The only real differentiation lies in one’s moral standing. This malleability of human nature has been a topic of debate for millennia. A plausible interpretation is that innate human nature is intrinsically good, fostering societal cohesion. However, external societal influences and prevailing customs can mar this inherent goodness. In ‘The Analects’, Confucius frequently differentiates between the gentleman and the petty man, emphasizing the necessity for individuals to transcend base desires and aspire for moral and personal betterment.

Subsequent Confucian scholars during the Song and Ming dynasties introduced terminologies like ‘the nature of Heaven and Earth’ (天地之性), for the nature influenced by external factors. They emphasized the pursuit of shedding the latter to reconnect with the former. Notably, Confucius himself did not delve into the origins of human nature or definitively categorize it as inherently good or evil. To understand this aspect comprehensively, it is imperative to explore the perspectives of Mencius and other Confucian scriptures.

4.2. Mencius and the intrinsic goodness of human nature

Mencius, a preeminent Confucian scholar, postulated a distinct view on human nature. In his work, ‘Mencius’, he asserted the inherent goodness of human nature, as indicated by his discourse with the Duke Wen of Teng: “When the prince, afterwards duke Wen of Teng, had to go to Chu, he went by way of Song, and visited Mencius. Mencius discoursed to him how the nature of man is good, and when speaking, always made laudatory reference to Yao and Shun.” (滕文公為世子，將之楚，過宋而見孟子。孟子道性善，言必稱堯舜。) (Mencius, *Mencius: Teng Wen Gong I*) [<https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>, accessed on 27.06.2023]. Mencius elucidated this intrinsic goodness, stating, “The feeling of commiseration implies the principle of benevolence; that of shame and dislike, the principle of righteousness; that of reverence and respect, the principle of propriety; and that of approving and disapproving, the principle of knowledge” [Mencius, *Mencius: Gao Zi I*, <https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>]. He contended that this goodness is not determined by exterior actions but arises from the intrinsic qualities innate in every individual. Thus, virtues like benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom are not extraneous acquisitions but inherent attributes within us. The crux lies in recognizing and actualizing these virtues. “Benevolence, righteousness, propriety/ritual, and wisdom are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them.” [<https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>]

In distinguishing humans from animals, Mencius deepened his understanding of life’s value. He noted the minute, yet profound, distinction between humans and animals: “That whereby man differs from the lower animals is but small. The mass of people cast it away, while superior men preserve it.” [Mencius, *Mencius: Li Lou II*, <https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>]. Mencius’s argument is not based on instincts or basic desires but on the recognition and adherence to moral responsibilities. In a contemporary context, one might wonder: will the distinction between humans and transhumans similarly be so minute and fundamentally rooted in morality?

One salient passage in Mencius can be construed as a non-instinctive delineation of human nature: “For the mouth to desire sweet tastes... and the four limbs to desire ease and rest - these things are natural. But there is the appointment of Heaven in connection with them, and the superior man does not

say of his pursuit of them, ‘It is my nature’.” [Mencius, *Mencius: Li Lou II*, <https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>] This passage underscores that mere physiological instincts do not encapsulate the essence of humanity. True human nature is embodied in ethical standards such as humanity, righteousness, propriety and wisdom. Mencius believed that an individual devoid of morality, irrespective of their human birth, fails to embody the true essence of being human.

Unlike numerous philosophical perspectives from the Enlightenment era onwards, which emphasize equal rights grounded in biological attributes, Confucianism accentuates the significance of cultivating humanity. It underscores the restraint of innate desires and emphasizes social characteristics. Confucianism’s delineation of humanity is not rooted in divine prerogatives but is anchored in societal expectations, demanding individuals adhere to human standards. Both Confucius and Mencius differentiated humans from animals using a moral compass, defining humanity through the lens of social responsibility and ethical standards.

4.3. The origins of human nature - interplay between heaven and humanity

Central to Confucian thought is the exploration of human nature’s origins. This inquiry finds its answer in the revered Confucian classic, *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The Doctrine of the Mean), which elucidates, “What Heaven has conferred is called The Nature; an accordance with this nature is called The Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction” [*Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean)*, Chinese Philosophy Books Electronic Project, <https://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong/zh>, accessed on 28.06.2023]. This assertion implicates that human nature is bequeathed by heaven, leading to the philosophical concept of ‘The Unification of Heaven and Humanity into One’. This paradigm is not nascent but finds its roots in one of the ancient Chinese scriptures, ‘The Book of Change (Zhouyi or I Ching)’ [<https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhs>, accessed on 28.06.2023]. The book states the following: “The Yi is a book of wide comprehension and great scope, embracing everything. There are in it the way of Heaven, the way of man, and the way of Earth. It then takes (the lines representing) those three Powers, and doubles them till they amount to six. What these six lines show is simply this, - the way of the three Powers. This way is marked by changes and movements, and hence we have the imitative lines. Those lines are of different grades (in the trigrams), and hence we designate them from their component elements.” [*The Book of Change: Xi Ci I*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhs>]

Cheng Yi (1033-1107), the prominent Song Dynasty philosopher, posited that the I Ching perhaps singularly delineates “heavenly human harmony” [9]. In this philosophical framework, the Universe is embodied by Heaven and Earth, while humanity symbolizes all beings. This interconnectedness implies that when references are made to Heaven, Earth, and man, it’s an all-encompassing nod to the Cosmos, all beings and the Universe. All entities emerge from Tai Chi (The Absolute 太極) and hence share intrinsic principles that govern both the macrocosm (Heaven and Earth) and the microcosm (human nature). This

connection is further delineated: “The attributes expressed by Qian constitute the male; those expressed by Kun constitute the female... Man, born of Heaven and Earth, is equal to Heaven and Earth. ... Qian 乾 (symbolizes Heaven, which) directs the great beginnings of things; Kun 坤 (symbolizes Earth, which) gives to them their completion.” [*The Book of Change: Xi Ci I*, <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhs>]

What distinguishes the conception of the ‘three talents’ in the I Ching is its divergence from a purely metaphysical examination. Heaven and earth are not aloof entities distanced from humanity. Instead, they amalgamate with humanity, becoming intrinsic components of human nature. Humans inherit the yin and yang qi of both Heaven and Earth, with humans positioned as yin relative to Heaven and yang vis-à-vis Earth. This tripartite relationship epitomizes an interconnected structure, positing Heaven and Earth as foundational pillars for humanity.

Significantly, it’s imperative to discern that in this context, ‘heaven’ lacks the theistic connotations associated with Western constructs of God or Lord. Rather, heaven resonates more intimately with humanity. As elucidated by Jean Chavalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Chinese alchemy (煉丹) can be conceived as “transforming the sky into the human microcosm” [10].

The doctrine that man is engendered by both Heaven and Earth, and consequently possesses traits resonant with these cosmic entities, has profound implications for human self-realization and conduct. Such a philosophy, when translated into the realm of governance, provides a foundational tenet for rulers, and when examined in the context of personal conduct, emerges as a moral compass guiding individual behaviour.

Numerous passages in The Great Treatise (Xi Ci 繫辭傳) encapsulate this understanding. For instance, it expounds: “There is a similarity between him and Heaven and Earth, and hence there is no contrariety in him to them. His knowledge embraces all things, and his course is (intended to be) helpful to all under the sky; - and hence he falls into no error. He acts according to the exigency of circumstances without being carried away by their current; he rejoices in Heaven and knows its ordinations; - and hence he has no anxieties. He rests in his own (present) position, and cherishes (the spirit of) generous benevolence; - and hence he can love (without reserve).” [<https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhs>] Or: “The Master said: - ‘Is not the Yi a perfect book?’ It was by the Yi that the sages exalted their virtue, and enlarged their sphere of occupation. Their wisdom was high, and their rules of conduct were solid.” [<https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/zhs>] Such contemplations illustrate that Confucian ethical frameworks and value systems are not mere extrapolations from daily human existence, but rather outcomes of intricate theoretical deductions. This can be briefly comprehended as a societal discernment rooted in an innate understanding of Nature.

Delving into Mencius' contemplation on human nature reveals its intrinsic nature. Human nature, as conferred by Heaven, leads individuals to introspection, propelling them towards self-improvement and transcendence. Mencius encapsulates this sentiment succinctly: "If you fully explore your mind, you will know your nature. If you know your nature, you know Heaven. To preserve your mind and nourish your nature is to serve Heaven. Not seeing duality between short life and long life, cultivate yourself by awaiting it. This is the way to set up your destiny." (盡其心者，知其性也。知其性，則知天矣。存其心，養其性，所以事天也。殀壽不貳，修身以俟之，所以立命也。) [Mencius, *Mencius: Jin Xin I*, <https://ctext.org/mengzi/zhs>] Reinforcing this viewpoint, the 15th-century Vietnamese Confucianist, Chu Tam Tinh (朱三省), accentuates the significance of internal rectification. For him, true self-improvement is derived not from external rituals but from genuine introspection, embodying the quintessential Confucian precept of 'autonomy'. "It is with the heart to correct oneself, To avoid shame with Heaven and Earth. What's the use of worship?" (正心以修身，庶不愧仰府。茲焉或未能，禳辟更何補。) [11] With Chu Tam Tinh, the cultivation of the self must start from within one's own heart/mind. All praying and worshiping has no meaning if they do not come from the heart. This is a typical Confucian concept of 'autonomy'.

Surprisingly, this theme of self-cultivation harmoniously interweaves with Buddhist teachings as demonstrated by Tran Nhan Tong (陳仁宗 1258-1308). Despite his steadfast Buddhist allegiance, he discerned common ground between Confucianism and Buddhism, particularly concerning the theme of self-cultivation (重亨修身 - 居塵樂道賦。第八會). For him, respecting the Buddhadharma (Bodhidharma) entailed an unerring commitment to self-improvement, encapsulating the congruence between the two philosophies.

Ho Chi Minh, while contextually disparate, also echoed the sentiment of self-refinement. He contended that societal revolution is contingent upon personal transformation, encapsulating this in his statement: "Revolution is to renovate the mind first" (革命先革心) [12]. For him, the precursor to societal transformation is the cultivation of the self: "The first thing to do, the first thing to rely on is to cultivate the self" (先之以自己修身) [12].

5. Addressing the dilemmas posed by transhumanism through a Confucian lens

5.1. Prioritizing Ethics over Biology

The rise of transhumanism, with its radical emphasis on surpassing human limitations through technology, collides with several core Confucian tenets. This confrontation poses significant ethical and societal challenges.

Firstly, Confucianism does not privilege biological attributes but stresses moral consciousness. Contrarily, in the transhumanist paradigm, biological enhancement is paramount, relegating innate human virtues to the periphery.

Secondly, Confucianism's foundational belief in 'learning to be human' emphasizes the role of education as the principal avenue for personal progress, societal advancement, and recognition. However, transhumanism suggests an alternate trajectory, where genetic modification and technological augmentations could potentially eclipse the importance of conventional education. Within this framework, those without modifications might find themselves marginalized, or worse, subjugated by those enhanced.

Thirdly, the family, a cornerstone of Confucian values, faces potential dissolution in a transhumanist society. While Confucianism venerates family as the nucleus of societal conduct, typified by relationships such as father-son, husband-wife, and siblings, transhumanism threatens these traditional structures, thereby challenging the bedrock of Confucian morality.

'The Analects' elucidates the Confucian belief in human limitations, suggesting that certain human boundaries are divinely ordained and thus, unassailable: "Death and life have their determined appointment; riches and honours depend upon Heaven" (死生有命，富贵在天) [Confucius, *The Analects: Yan Yuan*, <https://ctext.org/analects/zh>]. Such a perspective is antithetical to the transhumanist ethos, which champions the relentless pursuit of pushing and even eradicating these divinely set limits.

Historical perspectives on defining humanity have varied, ranging from Aristotle's assertion of humans as political beings to Descartes' focus on the physical. Yet, for Confucianism, the essence of humanity is entrenched in virtue. Ethics are not just a part of humanity; they fundamentally constitute it. In juxtaposition, transhumanism's largely mechanical view seems to neglect moral considerations, especially nuances surrounding suffering, sin and mortality.

Mencius offers a salient point: mere biological existence does not equate to truly living as a 'human'. The potential to be human is embedded in our biology, but its realization necessitates nurturing one's conscience, transcending baser instincts. This underpins the Confucian belief that what distinguishes humans from animals isn't just our similarities but a crucial differentiation: our innate moral sense, a faculty absent in other creatures.

This leads us to a realization that as we navigate the implications of transhumanism, it is paramount that we maintain our ethical compass, ensuring that advancements serve not just the biological, but the moral essence of humanity.

5.2. Re-evaluating the notion of static human nature

The concept of human nature and whether it remains immutable over time stands at the heart of many philosophical and religious debates. As societies evolve, one wonders whether human nature, too, undergoes a parallel metamorphosis.

Marxist philosophy postulates a dynamic perspective on human nature. It contends that human nature is not tethered to biological determinism but is shaped by the flux of social interactions. Central to this perspective is the notion that human nature is an amalgamation of material and spiritual relations, with the relations of production playing a pivotal role. Consequently, for Marxism, human nature is not an eternal, fixed essence but a mutable construct, evolving in tandem with societal progress.

Buddhism offers an even more radical standpoint, challenging the very premise of an inherent human nature. It posits that not only is the notion of a distinct, unchanging human nature (Anatta or ‘no-self’) flawed, but that all existence lacks an intrinsic nature (Śūnyatā or ‘emptiness’). Buddhism suggests that any discourse premised on a fixed human nature is inherently misguided, as it overlooks the transient and interdependent nature of existence.

In essence, as we contemplate the implications of transhumanism and its potential reshaping of humanity, it becomes crucial to reassess longstanding beliefs about human nature. Recognizing its fluidity, as argued by both Marxist philosophy and Buddhism, might provide a more accommodating framework to understand and navigate the transformative potentials of transhumanist technologies.

5.3. The cosmic context - bridging transhumanism and traditional ethos

The allure of transhumanism is evident in its ambition to harness both biology and technology in pursuit of advancing the human condition. As Bostrom suggests, this quest for ‘human enhancement’ reflects a vision of transforming humans into superior beings through technologically-facilitated evolution [13]. However, this very evolutionary paradigm presents a distinct problem, one that severs humans from their cosmological ties, promoting a sense of egoistic detachment from the broader Universe.

Contrastingly, Confucianism emphasizes a holistic harmony between humans and the Cosmos. Rooted in the belief that humanism stems from the Tao or the way of Heaven, Confucianism proposes a transcendental perspective. Humans, it asserts, are intrinsically tethered to the Universe, and by aligning with the cosmological order, they can attain true liberation. Vietnamese Confucianist Ly Tu Tan’s 李子晉 (1378-1457) poetic verses from ‘Dedication to the wall of the house of Úc Trai’ beautifully encapsulate this sentiment, suggesting a serene coexistence within the realm of humanity, whilst harmoniously syncing with the celestial essence (優遊禮讓安仁宅, 出入謙恭樂性天。) [14].

Transhumanism’s drive, while promising, inevitably encounters myriad ethical dilemmas. Here, Confucian teachings offer invaluable insights. Central to Confucianism is the principle of compassion, seen as the bedrock of virtue and an empathetic bridge connecting individuals. In a future marked by debates over

technological human enhancement, compassion and empathy will play a pivotal role, shaping decisions and demarcating the boundaries of post-human evolution.

Further, Confucianism delineates between individual ethics and societal morality. While the former pertains to personal conduct, the latter shapes the collective ethos. As societies grapple with the implications of transhumanist advancements, Confucianism's emphasis on moral integrity can offer guidance. Instituting a framework that upholds justice and underscores social responsibility becomes paramount. While discussions around the malleability of human nature abound, the quintessential challenge remains: ensuring that in our pursuit of becoming 'transhuman', we don't eclipse our inherent nature. Drawing from Mencius, this essence encapsulates innate virtues like compassion, forgiveness and integrity.

In conclusion, while technological strides are indispensable, their integration into society requires a harmonious synergy of science, politics and sociocultural structures. Confucianism, with its emphasis on social responsibility and cosmic connectivity, could very well serve as a guiding compass, ensuring that the transhumanist journey remains anchored in profound human values.

5.4. Embracing human limitations and respecting individual autonomy

Transhumanism's interpretation of the human body is imbued with a tragic overtone, a perspective that stands in stark contrast to the Confucian worldview. In Confucian thought, self-care and reverence for the body emanate from a profound respect for the gift bestowed by one's parents. Rather than viewing the body through a pessimistic lens, Confucianism envisions the human body as intrinsically interconnected with the macrocosm. This linkage transcends mere physicality, extending into the realms of virtue and morality. As such, the body is endowed with a moral character that resonates universally, deeply ingrained within an individual's essence. This is most eloquently illustrated in the 'Great Learning', which expounds that self-cultivation - achieved through sincere introspection and rectitude of thought - is foundational for harmonizing familial dynamics, governing states, and ensuring global tranquillity. The body, in this schema, is not merely a vessel awaiting technological or biological enhancement but represents a harmonious confluence of biology, society, technological advancement and ethical virtues.

The Confucian doctrine of the unity of Heaven and man further illuminates the quandaries posed by transhumanism. Rooted in the belief that human nature is a divine endowment from Heaven or Nature, Confucianism mandates a deference to these celestial edicts. Here, 'heaven' encapsulates both the tangible realm of the natural world and the ethereal domain of the transcendent. Humans, as per Confucian tenets, should navigate their existence in accordance with these divine laws, maintaining a reverence for the natural order. Yet, Confucianism does acknowledge the possibility of transcendence. This, however, is not sought by externalizing and altering the corporeal form, but rather through an introspective journey - a process of internal transcendence.

This may lead us to think that while the promises of transhumanism tantalize with prospects of superseding human limitations, the Confucian ethos offers a tempered perspective. It encourages the recognition of human finitude, all the while emphasizing the sanctity of individual choice and the profound interconnections between the human body, society and the Cosmos.

6. Conclusions

Transhumanism, as an emerging paradigm, represents both the inexorable march of progress and the myriad complexities inherent in intertwining human essence with technological advancements. However, the advance towards a transhumanist future must be tread with caution and conscientious deliberation. After all, “nobody can be sure that even with their enhanced capabilities, these new humans would be subjectively happier, more content, and more moral” [15, p. 113]. Every culture, in the face of the potential upheavals and transformative forces of transhumanism, is presented with the imperative to recalibrate and redefine its intrinsic identity and developmental trajectory.

As we stand on the precipice of a new epoch in human civilization, characterized by unparalleled modernization, nations must embark on a process of cultural introspection and recalibration. This process necessitates the reconstitution and integration of established cultural norms while preserving the core philosophies and values that define national identities. Such cultural touchstones not only shape the collective consciousness of nations but also offer distinct competitive advantages in this era of new-modernization.

For Vietnam, Confucianism, deeply embedded within its cultural tapestry, can serve as a guiding light in these transformative times. The tenets and values of Confucianism can be recontextualized and invoked to navigate the challenges posed by transhumanism. By drawing upon this rich reservoir of wisdom, solutions to contemporary dilemmas can be crafted, ensuring that as we move forward into this brave new world, we remain anchored to our profound cultural heritages. For example, Confucianism’s reverence for ancestral wisdom and the lessons of the past can provide a balanced counterpoint to the relentless drive for futuristic advancements. By reflecting on the accumulated wisdom of millennia, we can forge a path that harmoniously marries the promises of the future with the lessons of the past. In harnessing this rich reservoir of Confucian wisdom, Vietnam has the opportunity to sculpt solutions to the myriad dilemmas presented by our era, ensuring that as we chart our path into this brave new world, we do so with a deep-rooted connection to our profound cultural legacies.

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