

Confucian & Post-Modern Perspectives: The Reality of Artificial Intelligence

With the creation of the computer and the Internet, entering into the 21st century society saw tremendous growth in technology. The Information Age brought incredible technical advances which in turn led to improvements in business, medicine, travel, education, and a host of other sectors. Aside from its material success, it also began to shift how humans interacted and conducted themselves. Technology evolved from simply a convenient tool, to an integral component of daily life. Human and computer, two things that were easily separable in the past, have suddenly become so interwoven that it is difficult to tell what's what. Difficult to understand their relationship and how they exist both separately and as one; difficult to define the line between personality and personal computer. A topic both revered as revolutionary and denounced as controversial, artificial intelligence has taken the hot seat of debate.

The elements behind artificial intelligence are not new to the information age, but date back well before the last few decades. Evidence of these concepts could be seen in “ancient Egyptian figurines with movable limbs”, eighteenth century’s “Wolfgang von Kempelen's Maelzel Chess Automaton”, and Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine and companion Lady Lovelace¹. Romanticized and often eerie Hollywood representations are numerous and played a critical role in many world-views’ interpretations of the reality of artificial intelligence. Hal 9000 (*A Space Odyssey*), R2D2 (*Star Wars*), Wall-E (*Wall-E*), and Samantha from the recent 2013 Spike Jonze film *Her* are just a few examples. Humans attempt and continue to attempt to create something in their likeness, parallel to God’s actions in the book of Genesis.

¹ Kevin Savetz, “A Brief History of Artificial Intelligence,” Atariarchives.org, last modified 1984, http://www.atariarchives.org/deli/artificial_intelligence.php.

Philosophy and Computer Science professor Dr. Istvan S. N. Berkeley from The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, draws a parallel between artificial intelligence and cognitive science, explaining that both are based on the premise that mental activity is fundamentally computational. “Artificial Intelligence is the study of man-made computational devices and systems which can be made to act in a manner which we would be inclined to call intelligent”². Dr. Berkeley highlights an important piece of this definition, what “we would be inclined” to view as intelligence may differ from the actual truth. Perhaps one of the most respectable and intuitive thinkers in the artificial intelligence field was Alan M. Turing, a renowned computer scientist and philosopher at his prime in the 1930s. Turing understood the difference between human and machine and determined that there had to be a standard on which to compare the two:

“[He] theorized that machines could imitate thought [and] proposed a test for AI machines...the Turing Test calls for a panel of judges to review typed answers to any question that has been addressed to both a computer and a human. If the judges can make no distinctions between the two answers, the machine may be considered intelligent”³

At this point in time, no computer has been able to pass the Turing Test, however there are many predictions and theories of when (or if) a machine could eventually prevail. This potential successful outcome has the ability to change not only the identity of technology, but the identity of mankind. It is thus incredibly important to evaluate the validity of artificial intelligence, as its reality could reveal tremendous and possibly negative conclusions about our reality.

² István S. N. Berkeley Ph.D., “What is Artificial Intelligence?” University of Louisiana Lafayette, Last modified 1997, <http://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~isb9112/dept/phil341/wisai/WhatisAI.html>.

³ Kevin Savetz

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines intelligence as “The ability to learn or understand or to deal with new or trying situations...the skilled use of reason...the act of understanding”⁴. There seems to be no question that computers are certainly equipped to deal with situations, process logical functions, and learn from the results. The true question is whether or not a computer can really understand in the way that a human can. Can the concept of intelligence be defined to processing information and reasoning to produce a correct conclusion? Or does intelligence extend beyond the capabilities of a programmed machine? Contrasting belief systems approach the idea of intelligence differently, which seems to suggest that the answer to the question of whether or not artificial intelligence is real, depends upon one’s beliefs about reality as a whole. Of course it would be irrational to conclude that more than one belief is plausible, especially when they contradict one another. As there can only be one answer to the question, it is important to examine opposing sides to reach a consensus on such a complex and meaningful topic. The purpose of this paper is to explore and conclude on the validity of artificial intelligence in both society and our existence through Confucianism and Post-Modernism perspectives.

Confucian beliefs are largely centered on the “self” or individual human. Confucius scholar Herbert Fingarette’s famous title “Confucius: The Secular as Sacred”⁵ summarizes this idea in a few words. According to Confucius, we live in a world that is flawed and full of violence; we ultimately seek truth, but we are often afraid to accept it. Only by rising above this violence can we escape its grasp completely and attain a state of perfection. This “conclusive” truth is not found in a particular god per say, but rather within oneself as a result of being a good

⁴ “Intelligence,” Merriam-Webster.com, Last modified 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.

⁵ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular As Sacred* (Religious Traditions of the World) (San Francisco: Waveland Press Inc., 1998), 1.

person. Core virtues to be upheld include benevolence, wisdom, faith, righteousness, and decorum. The importance of these fundamental principles are expressed by living rationally; conscious of one's actions towards others and maintaining self-control.

Confucius frequently emphasizes his own pursuit of wisdom and the importance for others to do the same. In *The Analects of Confucius* it states, "I am not one who was born in the possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity, and earnest in seeking it there"⁶. Seeking wisdom is certainly an important aspect of a Confucian's purpose and meaning in life. But what exactly is knowledge for a Confucian? Is it math, science, and reason? Or does it extend beyond? While modern-day society contends that being wise involves the accumulation of facts along with ability to operate and understand them in a well-rounded way, Confucians go beyond this purely mental interpretation. Things like math and science are a part of our present world, which as mentioned before, is a violent one. Although it is admirable to be a scholar of these sorts, it's not sufficient when it comes to the pursuit of genuine and meaningful wisdom. True wisdom is achieved when one can fully understand oneself in a divinely dimensional way. Not only is it an understanding, but a state of existence that is realized through self-cultivation.

When considering the Confucian perspective of the reality of artificial intelligence, it is necessary to take not only their definition of wisdom into account, but also their definition of humanity, as artificial intelligence seems to be a blend of both. Confucius was not direct in the *Analects* concerning human nature. He "classified men as belonging to three groups: 'upper, middle and lower,' but as this classification was made according to man's 'learning ability' it had nothing to do with the common nature of man"⁷. Surely if benevolence, wisdom, faith,

⁶ Confucius, and Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, New York: Random House, 1938.

⁷ Pei-Jung Fu, *Human Nature and Human Education on Human Nature as Tending Towards Goodness in Classical Confucianism*, Taipei, Taiwan: National University, 2014.

righteousness, and decorum are the goals of all men, then human nature is benevolent, wise, faithful, righteous, and decorous. However keeping in mind that men are of a violent world, this list of desirable traits only addresses how man ought to be, rather than how man naturally is. Arguably so, the fact that each trait is a product of goodness points to the idea that although human nature may not be explicitly definable, it tends toward goodness.

Knowing these details of wisdom and human nature according to Confucius, one can more effectively analyze the potential similarities and differences of the wisdom and “human” nature of artificial intelligence. If human nature is inclined towards goodness, then it is reasonable to assume that the creations of humans are also inclined towards goodness. It would be a disconnect from reality for something good to create something bad. But artificial reality is not a creation which reflects human nature, but rather an attempt at that reflection. Its own name suggests this failure in authenticity; it’s not real intelligence, but *artificial* intelligence. Confucius never offers up the concept of knowledge being a creatable thing. It exists, but it has always existed. Artificial intelligence is aptly titled and indicates that perhaps in the eyes of Confucius, its inadequate ability to match the realm of human nature makes it no more real than the disconnected and violent world surrounding humanity. Author Benjamin Woolley comments on the interrelation of artificial reality and actual reality in his book *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality*:

[Artificial reality] reveals that the things we assume to be independent of us are actually constructed by us. It reveals that being ‘natural’, is not simply a value-free,

unproblematic, apolitical objective state - though part of its mythology is to make itself appear to be so.⁸

Woolley's observation implies not only that human nature can be messy and precarious, but that human nature is above the artificial. It is real and it is natural. The existence of anything constructed by us, whether it is artificial intelligence or a Barbie doll, is not independent in itself and thus it is not a part of the same reality as mankind.

While its meaningful existence may come into question, what about its legitimacy of the pursuit of wisdom? The purpose of creating artificially intelligent computing machines was to pursue knowledge, something the Confucius revered and hailed as the meaning of life. This motive requires a deeper scrutiny of artificial intelligence's reality. Professor Radhika Nagpal from Harvard University's School of Engineering and Applied Sciences explains artificial intelligence as

“a field, from the very beginning, [which] embraced the idea of duplicating human intelligence, problem-solving, creativity, language, self-improvement, etc”⁹. It appears to be that the intelligence of the machine is intended to be the same kind of intelligence that humans acquire. However a significant difference comes with intent. Computers, no matter what abilities they are programmed to have, do not have a personality or soul according to a Confucian. It may seem that many decisions an artificially intelligent computer makes are based on the computer's will, however this concept is contradictory because without a soul, there is no will. There is no intention for a computer to achieve wisdom because “intent” is a purely human characteristic. A computer's “intent” is to accomplish a goal or task that is either pre-defined or created from pre-

⁸ Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992.

⁹ Radhika, Nagpal, “Intelligent Machines: Reasoning, Actions, and Plans” (presentation, Harvard University Computer Science 182, Cambridge, MA, Fall 2010).

existing conditions determined by a programmer (human). Human intent is based upon desires, goals, and a moral standard. Mankind is not pre-programmed, but has free will to make decisions based on whatever components they wish. The meaning of life is the pursuit of wisdom, not the idea of wisdom itself. Computer's "pursuit" is artificial while human pursuit is genuine and willful.

An additional and significant disconnect with Confucian's idea of wisdom and the validity of artificial intelligence is what intelligence includes. To an artificially intelligent computer, intelligence is based upon math, science, and decision-making programs. On a surface level these things are relevant to the concept of wisdom, however they are temporary, incomplete, and void of true meaning and purpose. Confucian views on wisdom include an element above math, science, and fact-based decision making. It includes a sense of self and the cultivation of moral behavior and ethic, something absent in artificially intelligent machines. Confucius in the presence of one of these machines would have seen it as a purely as a machine, an object. No matter its superficial similarities to human reasoning and behavior, it is empty in meaning and purpose. Artificial intelligence does not lean towards goodness, as good and bad are not comprehensible to a soulless device. In the *Analects* it states, "Fan Ch'ih asked about benevolence. The Master said, 'It is to love all men.' He asked about knowledge. The Master said, 'It is to know all men'"¹⁰. Knowing all men is beyond factual knowledge, something that only another man can understand. Machine is not man, and cannot know man.

It is evident that these perceptions of wisdom and human nature do not match up. Ultimately, reality is beyond this world and cannot be achieved through computational reasoning. An artificially intelligent computer is not real because reality is beyond the

¹⁰ Confucius, and Arthur Waley.

capabilities of the machine. Artificial intelligence is limited and does not exhibit benevolence, true wisdom, faith, righteousness, or decorum. It is of the world and does not have the conscious will or ability to reach the point of self-cultivation that is necessary to achieve a heightened state of wisdom. Based on these observations, Confucius asserts that artificial intelligence is not intelligence as it is inherently meaningless and has no importance and thus no true existence in reality.

Non-western cultures and belief systems are usually focused on the pursuit of wisdom by escaping ignorance and arrogance. Usually grounded by a moral system or standard, they abhor personal opinion and feeling as they are inconsistent and unsubstantial. Moving into the 19th and 20th centuries, Modernism began to emerge as an extremely different realm of thought. Instead of relying on a God or ultimate moral standard, modernists reject these ideas and instead move forward with the aim of social progress. Author Andreas Huyssen describes Modernism as constituting itself “through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture”¹¹. While non-western traditions view things like art as an expression of the meaning of reality, modernists see it as a form of cultured décor that is the product of genius. A new theory began to emerge that countered these definitions. Postmodernism supported the importance of things like art being based upon their authenticity to the individual. Opinion was demolished and replaced with idea that nothing is better than anything else. Experience trumped meaning and obscurity replaced definitive thought. No longer was there an ultimate truth, but as Aristotle speculated and unraveled, “if nothing can be truly asserted, even the following claim would be false, the claim that there is no

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii.

true assertion”¹². Although similar to Confucian beliefs because of the importance of oneself, Post-modernism is not grounded within the same core values. In fact, post-modernism abstains from the entire concept of being grounded in any one particular thing, arguing that as there is no moral purpose in life, contingency, relativity, and power through identity make up the fabric of our society and universe.

A postmodernist interpretation of artificial intelligence can be difficult to pin down, as postmodernism is ambiguous and often times self-contradicting. However it is imperative to scrutinize this relatively new worldview, especially as the exploration of artificial intelligence is growing within an extensively increasing population of postmodern thinkers. Unlike modernism which embraced science and technology as an agent of change and progress, postmodernism has mixed views on the topic. Professor and philosopher Brent G. Wilson explains that “postmodernism took a second look and wondered whether our lives were really better for all the gadgets and toys...we can see the efficiency and the improvements, but we can also see the dehumanizing, mechanizing effects in our lives”¹³. Progress and achievement were no longer points of success for a postmodernist, who believes that progress, especially with its multi-faceted results, is a relative term. Of course the “realness” of artificial intelligence does not require an evaluation of its goodness for a postmodernist. If goodness is relative, than it should not be a basis for the assessment of artificial intelligence’s reality.

Post-modernists believe that truth and knowledge are grounded in social relations and everyday life, as well as constructed by people¹⁴. This suggests that if truth and knowledge are products of human creation, then artificial intelligence – a product of human creation – must

¹² “Philosophy Overview,” *OpenSite*, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://open-site.org/Society/Philosophy/>.

¹³ Brent G. Wilson, Charles R. Dills, A.J. Romiszowski, *Instructional development paradigms* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1997), 299.

¹⁴ Brent G. Wilson, Charles R. Dills, A.J. Romiszowski.

certainly fall into this category. According to the Public Broadcasting Service's glossary description of postmodernism, reality is a personal experience, "[Reality] is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality... reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually"¹⁵. Whether or not artificial intelligence is truly intelligent, is dependent upon an individual's understanding of it. If artificial intelligence is a bowl resting on a table and one is looking at it directly, its position can be interpreted differently if the right eye is closed in comparison to when the left eye is closed. Assuming vision alone is a sufficient indication of reality, then reality is changeable and moldable by an individual's experience of it. If reality or wisdom was an ultimate truth, the bowl's position would not change with differing perspectives. Essentially, knowledge and wisdom is whatever mankind constructs it to be. Like reality, it is a product of human interpretation and experience. This can be applied to the overall question of whether or not artificial intelligence is real. Computers are programmed to draw from a pool of facts in order to reason, problem-solve, and make complex decisions. It seems to mirror a postmodernist perspective of how humans make decisions. One of the primary triumphs of modern-day artificial intelligence is its ability to learn and draw conclusions based on past experiences or circumstances that it has encountered. If the construction of knowledge is based upon a person's experience and perception of reality, then a product of knowledge is a reflection of this reality. Thus, according to a post-modernist, the validity and reality of artificial intelligence can be proven based on the premise that it is a result of human knowledge, which is essentially constructed based on some form of reality.

¹⁵ "Postmodernism," *Public Broadcasting Service*, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gengloss/postm-body.html>.

The goal of artificial intelligence, as mentioned before, is to understand and emulate human intelligence. Human intelligence, although generally comprised of learned facts and behaviors, is largely influenced by the pre-existing element of human nature. A postmodernist perspective on human nature is for this reason valuable when considering the reality of artificial intelligence. Largely focused on a sense of self and personal identity, it is no surprise that the postmodernist definition of human nature is one of individual determinacy. As there is no definite truth, there is no definite human nature that prevails over another. Psychologist Peter D. Ashworth elaborates on this concept stating that human nature “is to be treated as a feature of the discourse of a particular culture at a particular time...for postmodernists...there will be no such thing as ‘human nature’”¹⁶. But is it nonexistent? Or just flexible? Postmodernists find no need to address this idea, as truth is found in both options. As the Encyclopedia Britannica affirms regarding this worldview, “Postmodernists insist that all, or nearly all, aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined”¹⁷. Removing the human element from human nature allows for the possibility of artificial intelligence to achieve or mirror human intelligence, reaching its ultimate goal. Turing would have agreed and reflected this result through the basis of his test:

If two objects provide the same responses to the same stimuli then they are of the same type. If we test two objects to see whether they display behavior we call "intelligent" and both results are positive, then it is irrelevant that one of them happens to be human and the other a computer.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ashworth, Peter D. *Psychology and 'Human Nature'*. Hove, East Sussex: Psychology Press, 2000.

¹⁷ Brian, Duignan. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 13th ed., s.v. “Postmodernism.” (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014), accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1077292/postmodernism>.

¹⁸ Colin Beardon, “Computers, postmodernism and the culture of the artificial,” *AI & Society* 8, no. 1 (1994): 9.

An interesting and rather unsettling result is that if there is no difference between human and the artificially intelligent machine, than what it to say that a machine couldn't construct its own knowledge, truth, and reality?

Although not quite as direct of an answer as the Confucian response, it is clear that there is validity to the existence of artificial intelligence. The impression, definition, and application of artificial intelligence may vary depending on the person; however, the reality of the concept is certainly real in many respects. It would not make sense, according to a postmodernist, to assert that artificial intelligence is ultimately and definitively real. Nonetheless, it can be real in certain circumstances or perspectives, and thus cannot be proved as "un-real".

Confucianism and Postmodernism both bring very interesting and contrasting arguments to the table when it comes to the reality of artificial intelligence. Confucianism discounts the idea as irrational based on the idea that there is an ultimate meaning and purpose in life, thus this necessity of meaning beyond reasoning is the basis for existence in reality. Postmodernism accepts the idea as plausible based on the conclusion that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose in life and as a result, artificial reality's existence is an adaptable concept based upon individual perception. Comparing these two theories can only usher in deciding upon a much broader and fundamental question, is there an ultimate meaning or purpose in life? Confucius determines his answer on the assumption that there is, while postmodernists determine their answer on the assumption that there isn't.

It may not be possible to prove an ultimate truth or god in which Confucians believe; however, it is impossible to comprehensively disprove. Postmodernists reject the proposition of any one standard. This therefore denies the basis of nearly all wisdom-seeking traditions.

Although not identical in philosophy, a postmodernist and atheist would find good company with one another. Former atheist-turned-Christian scholar and author C.S Lewis addressed the idea of there being no ultimate truth in his famous novel, *Mere Christianity*. Although Confucianism and Christianity are undoubtedly different in many ways, they both adhere to the idea of one standard from which everything else is based, whether that is an eternal and universal moral principle, or an eternal and almighty God. Lewis's exploration on the idea supports both belief systems:

If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning.¹⁹

Lewis brings up an incredibly important and unraveling point against postmodernism.

Determining that the universe is meaningless implies that mankind has some idea of what meaning is. However if the universe is meaningless, where would we have gotten this idea?

Postmodernism tries to be consistent with nothingness. However they're evaluation of nothingness is based on something. Perceiving something and drawing conclusions based on that perception implies that meaning has been present and dispelled or ultimately accepted, validating its existence.

Based on this gaping hole in postmodernist thought, the argument accepting the potential reality of artificial intelligence based on perception cannot be upheld. If the meaninglessness of everything attempts to support the reality and truth of something, the obvious existence of meaning discredits this something's reality. Confucius argued that there was certainly meaning in the universe and that (later argued by Tze-Sze), "there is no place in the highest heavens above

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 21.

nor in the deepest waters below where the moral law is not to be found”²⁰. Keeping this understanding in mind, then everything within the universe is to be based off of this absolute truth. Artificial intelligence in the eyes of Confucianism is not intelligence at all. No part of a man-made computational machine is encompassed in Confucius’s explanation of wisdom. Referring back to the *Analects*, “Fan Ch’ih asked about benevolence. The Master said, ‘It is to love all men.’ He asked about knowledge. The Master said, ‘It is to know all men’”²¹. Humanity is a crucial component of attaining knowledge and wisdom. Although artificial intelligence is made in the likeness of man, it will never be man. It lacks the humanistic quality that allows for the exploration of wisdom and self-cultivation. By eliminating the “intelligence” component of “artificial intelligence”, what is left? Simply “artificial”. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, artificial refers to something that is “not natural or real...made, produced, or done to seem like something natural...not happening or existing naturally”²². A Confucian interpretation of artificial intelligence is correct, as the computational machine is neither intelligent nor inherently “real” in a universe of meaning and moral principle.

The implications of artificial intelligence in society are numerous. As it gains ground and capability as a potential aid or replacement to humans, humanity’s existence becomes shady. The closer artificial intelligence is allowed to advance towards human intelligence, the more humans see themselves as a reflection of humanity. Society becomes more mechanical, trying to match the artificially intelligent by consuming facts for the sake of facts. A new human “perfection” is created that eliminates a sense of self. Ultimately, artificial intelligence is a meaningless tool that strips away human dignity. Even at a primitive level it is degrading as “humans have an

²⁰ Confucius, and Arthur Waley.

²¹ Confucius, and Arthur Waley.

²² “Artificial,” Merriam-Webster.com, Last modified 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.

extraordinary ability to think, analyze, and use judgment. If artificial intelligence is used for interpreting, then the human mind and its capabilities might go to waste”²³. Laziness and incivility have become common-place and continue to assimilate as the norm. Artificial intelligence’s detraction from the pursuit of true wisdom not only discounts its validity in society, but establishes itself as a threat to truth. Although it is helpful in areas of security, medicine, science, education, general exploration, and technological efficiency, it comes at a great cost. An individual must determine the importance of the pursuit of wisdom in relation to the effects of artificial intelligence on oneself and society. Disrobing of a postmodern perspective is essential to maintaining dignity, purpose, and the promise of elevation beyond a violent world. The attempt of achievement of this through artificial means is futile. Man should not become the tool. As Confucius declared, “The accomplished scholar is not a utensil”²⁴. The pursuit of real intelligence is what truly matters.

²³ “Implications: Why Create Artificial Intelligence?” *Miami University*, last modified April 19, 1998, <http://www.units.miamioh.edu/psybersite/cyberspace/aisurge/implications.shtml>.

²⁴ Confucius, and Arthur Waley.

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