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Artificial intelligence's challenges to the essence of humanity from the perspective of Martin Luther's anthropology in Chinese context

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This article argued the following points. Firstly, the challenge posed by artificial intelligence (AI) to the essence of humanity is serious. Secondly, it is important to analyse the external context and internal dynamics of the history of interaction between knowledge and power. Thirdly, it is necessary to trace the intellectual history of humanity becoming god-like. Finally, by combining Martin Luther's anthropology with insights from social science and philosophical theology, this article advocated for guiding human beings to use their capabilities for good rather than evil through ethical and legal constraints. Efforts in Chinese context should be made to resolve the conflict between humanity's pursuit of omnipotence and its failure to develop towards complete goodness, so as to avoid catastrophic consequences for humanity.

Contribution: The present article's special contribution was the theological reflection referring to AI's challenges to the essence of humanity from Luther's anthropology in Chinese context. The conflict between omnipotence and omnibenevolence has been highlighted as the key problem which human beings need to solve in the face of AI's challenge.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; Luther; Chinese context; omnipotence; omnibenevolence.

Introduction
Martin Luther's tripartite theory of human nature and the challenge of artificial intelligence

Martin Luther advocated the tripartite theory of human nature, believing that humans consist of flesh, soul, and spirit in unity. This reflects deep-rooted Jewish Hebrew tradition and Greek tradition, where flesh refers to dust, spirit refers to the breath of life, and the combination of breath and dust constitutes a living soul, as described in Genesis 2:7. God used these two 'elements' to create 'man' to become a 'living being', named 'Adam'. Humans are composed of two 'physical elements' (flesh [*aaphaar min haa aadaam*] and spirit [*nismat hayyim*]), and the combination of the two forms a 'living soul' [*lenephes hayyaah*]. The first death of human beings occurs when the breath and flesh separate, while the second death is the separation of the breath and the eternal God. Luther specifically distinguishes between the religious perspective of *coram Deo* [in front of God] and the humanistic perspective of *coram hominibus et coram mundo et Ipse coram* [in front of human beings and the world and self] (Pelikan & Lehmann 1957:203–306, 367). In 1525, Martin Luther responded to Erasmus and addressed this issue. In the context of human will, freedom, and the relationship between God and humans (or between heaven and humanity in Chinese context), Luther emphasised contextual limitations that many humanist scholars overlook. Firstly, in the context of religious salvation between humans and God, for Luther, human will is not free but bound. Humans lack the capacity to perform absolute good according to God's standards (Lai 2021:1–20; WA 1883:635–636). Secondly, the will of human beings has only a relative freedom of choice in ethics, science, social science, psychology, and other humanistic fields, which are related to interactions with other people, the world, and oneself (Weber, Baehr & Wells 2002 & 2011:35–40). Human nature, including knowledge, emotions, will, conscience, and reason, is not completely destroyed. Therefore, humans can do limited acts of goodness (WA 1883:636). Inheriting and developing Augustine's anthropology (Bai 2023:64–77), Luther emphasised that Christians are simultaneously both good and/or righteous and corrupt and/or sinful individuals [*partim bonnum, partim malum or partim iustus, partim peccare*]. They are also both righteous and sinful [*simul iustus et peccator*]. The righteousness of humans before God can never be completely perfect and flawless, thus it cannot become a means or merit for salvation that brings people into unity and reconciliation with God. However, human righteousness before fellow humans holds significant importance in ethical morality and practical life, even though it is not perfectly good (Pelikan & Lehmann 1957:203–306).

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a novel technology. Various analyses can be conducted to discuss the impact of AI on the essence of humanity from the perspective of philosophical anthropology. I aim to analyse the interaction between human knowledge and power from Luther's understanding of humanity and religion. In the Chinese context, knowledge is emphasised as a power to change the world and exert influence. The focus of this article will be the impact the interaction between knowledge and power will have on the future of humanity – whether it leads to destruction or immortality.

From such a perspective of humanity and religions, AI's challenge to the interaction between knowledge and power involves, in fact, the 'divine-human relationship', and the main conflict will occur between 'omnipotence' and 'omnibenevolence'.

The external context and internal dynamics of the history of the interaction between knowledge and power

In the history of human development, the interaction between knowledge and power is influenced not only by external factors but also by internal motivations (Yang 2023:171–186).

The external context of intellectual history: Reflecting on the relationship between heaven, humanity, objects, and oneself

In order to gain an understanding of the external context of intellectual history, it is essential to reflect on the following elements: heaven, humanity, objects, and oneself. When pursuing knowledge and power *coram Deo*, one must consider the relationship between heaven and humanity. 'Heaven' can refer to the physical universe or the spiritual, philosophical, and religious realm. Therefore, *coram Deo* is prioritised, followed by *coram hominibus* and *coram mundo*, and finally *ipse coram* (WA 1883:636). All of these aspects involve knowledge, power, and the underlying truths or interests. When AI interacts with Heaven (i.e., God), humanity, natural world and oneself, the big challenge will concern the capabilities of AI. This has led people to shift from the religious concept of 'eternal life of the flesh' to the tangible reality of prolonging physical life through medical, genetic, and healthcare advancements. Besides the pursuit of physical immortality, there is also the pursuit of spiritual immortality of a humanistic nature, such as the Confucian emphasis on achieving merit, virtue, and wisdom, aiming to transcend the difference between humans and gods, and move from the finite to the infinite. Furthermore, there is the religious concept of 'eternal life of the spirit', where the body is resurrected and transformed into a spiritual form, as seen in Abrahamic religions (Ni 2024:1–21). In the relationship between heaven, humanity, objects, and oneself, the challenge posed by AI to the interaction between knowledge and power needs to be analysed from different levels: the spiritual, the soul, and the flesh. This can be seen obviously

according to Luther's understanding of a human being as the unity of 'spirit, soul and flesh' rather than the dualist unity of 'soul and flesh' (Pelikan & Lehmann 1957:303–304).

The internal dynamics of intellectual history: Pursuit of interests, power, and truth

Concerning the internal dynamics of intellectual history, it is essential to emphasise the concepts of 'interests, power, and truth'. 'Interests' are closely related to utilitarianism and pragmatism, as human pursuits often have a goal that may involve personal interests at the level of the soul and the flesh. In Chinese culture, this is often referred to as the 'Dao', which is similar yet different from the Ancient Greek concept of 'Logos', or 'Onto / Being / Truth / Existence / Being'. Many argue that Ancient Greek philosophy is a static philosophy that seeks Logos, which is the static, unchanging reality and essence behind phenomena.

In Chinese philosophy, the concept of 'Dao' is a dynamic way or path, which is superior to static notions. However, the utilitarian and pragmatic aspects of the Dao also have negative implications, as they may disregard moral distinctions between good and evil. Besides the original meaning of a way or path, Dao also embodies the idea of 'reason' or 'principle'. While it shares similarities with the Greek concept of 'Logos', the 'Dao' more often denotes a practical solution, method, or approach, imbued with strong utilitarian and pragmatic characteristics (Fung Yu-lan 1997:120–130).

Many scholars view *Yijing . Xici*'s phrase, 'When one is at an impasse, change is necessary; through change, one finds a way; by finding a way, one endures', this is very utilitarian and pragmatic. The 'way' emphasises practicality, but its significant drawback lies in its lack of concern for moral standards, truth, or ethical principles. It prioritises practical utility over moral considerations, potentially leading to unethical behaviour (Butti 2013:1–19).

An example is that the state of Qin (before 221 BC), initially small and backward, became a dominant power under the legalist influence of Shang Yang, who prioritised efficiency and centralised power to morality with ruthless methods (Huang 2024:1–6; Shang 2009). Despite its effectiveness, the Qin legalist system was criticised for its ethical shortcomings and negative consequences.

This contrast between 'Dao' and 'Logos' is significant as it delves into issues of truth, power, interests, and efficiency. 'Efficacy' refers to the ability to concentrate all forces to successfully accomplish a task, which highlights its potency. However, if the task is benevolent, then all will be well; if it is malevolent, then the consequences will be dire. Therefore, both the external factors of the cosmos and the internal factors of interests, power, and truth are crucial in the

interaction between knowledge and power (Ng 2015: 163–175).

In this context, analysing the interaction between knowledge and power brought about by AI naturally involves various attempts by humans to achieve godhood through knowledge, power, and goodness.

The history of the idea that humans become gods

The history of intellectual development proves that the main issue in the interaction between knowledge and power is that humans wish to become gods. The God believed in by Abrahamic religions and Luther is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. 'Omnipotence' and 'omnibenevolence' are at its core. Knowledge is originally the result of understanding the heavens, humans, and the world, and the motivation may be to improve life, pursue interests, satisfy curiosity, or seek truth, among others (Pu 2020:6–12).

Different individuals' values determine the motivation behind our pursuit of knowledge, whether it is for personal gain, greed for power, or for truth. What then is the purpose of such interaction between knowledge and power? Now, an important feature of AI is its strong capability, high efficiency, and clear goals. Artificial intelligence possesses significant power and is increasingly advancing towards omnipotence, although it may never truly reach it; it is gradually moving towards the infinite. What impact will this development have on humanity? As for 'omnibenevolence', will human nature tend towards goodness? If this question remains unanswered, the greater the power humanity gains through AI, the greater the danger will occur for humankind.

The intellectual history of humans aspiring to become gods can be broadly categorised into three main patterns, which are discussed in the following sections.

The first pattern: The evolutionary mode

This mode emphasises a transition in human history from religion to philosophy and science (Cotesta 2017:217–240). In the first Axial Age of China, there was a strong belief in spirits and gods among the people (Shaughnessy 1997:1–20), but with the rise of humanism later, it led to the emergence of science. The same pattern can be observed in ancient Greece as well. Therefore, according to the Axial Age theory, human civilisation evolves and becomes increasingly advanced and civilised over time. However, this evolutionary and progressive path cannot be equated entirely with Darwin's theory of evolution (Darwin 2008:50–80), as evolutionism represents a more extreme and intense theory of evolution. The intellectual evolutionary model suggests that there are differences, hierarchies, and qualities among different civilisations. This theory categorises humans into three stages. The *Homo Primaria* is the earliest primitive stage of humanity, characterised by blind adherence to religious

authority for survival and basic rights. Their knowledge of the world, the heavens, humanity, and material matters was limited, leading them to fear and worship authority. The *Homo Sapiens* (the wise stage of humanity) is the second stage where individuals possess knowledge and wisdom. 'Wisdom' does not mean modern humans, but rather denotes a stage in human development characterised by increased intellectual capacity, critical thinking, and knowledge acquisition. In this stage of humanity, human subjectivity is awakened, reason is applied, emotions are fulfilled, will is independent, and practical activities are carried out. The *Homo Deus* is the third stage, which is today, closely related to AI, where humans become godlike. Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that humanity is now entering the stage of *Homo Deus*, effectively summarising certain developmental phenomena of humanity. However, not everyone agrees with or accepts this theory, as it categorises civilisations into superior and inferior, and ranks them hierarchically (Harari 2017a:10–30). Darwin's evolutionary theory has been appreciated in natural science but paradocially has been oppsed in social science by many people, escpecially during the post-colonial period after World War II. Thus, many people oppose to classify different civilisations into developed and developing, superior and inferior. Hereqin the term 'civilisation' did not refer to 'civilisation' itself, but rather to 'civilised' societies. 'Civilisation' was seen as something positive, cultured, excellent, and modern, and the word 'civilised' was used as an adjective rather than a noun.

The second pattern: Cultural essentialist mode

This mode views individuals as unique and transcendent manifestations of universality beyond history. Each entity possesses a set of attributes essential to its nature and function. This mode holds the view that fundamental cultural characteristics of human group produce personality, heritage, cognitive abilities, or 'natural talents' that are shared by all members of a cultural group (Kurzwelly, Fernana & Ngum 2011:17–29; Nathan 2015: 101–124). This viewpoint is popular in mainland China. For example, Professor Chen Lai from Tsinghua University proposed a series of core values of Chinese civilisation, which are juxtaposed against Western civilisation. He argues that the greatest characteristic of Chinese civilisation is that it prioritises the collective over the individual, responsibility over power, and obligation over freedom. He believes this is a unique and positive trait of China, contrasting sharply with the individualism characteristic of the West. However, he emphasises that these contrasting traits are neither superior nor inferior, neither good nor bad; they are simply different manifestations of universal truths (Chen 2015:1–50). This has led to the relativist view that there is no distinction between the civilisations and cultures of the world in terms of superiority or inferiority, good or bad. There is no division between barbarism and civilisation. Currently, in mainland China, this view, known as cultural essentialism mode, seems to be mainstream. It provides theoretical support for refusing to integrate into Western civilisation or reform according to its standards in order to maintain opposition between Chinese civilisation

and Western civilisation, serving political objectives to defend the present Chinese government. Scholars like Chen Lai, who represent this view, may not explicitly state it, but their intentions are evident. When standards of good and evil, right and wrong, and truth and falsehood become blurred, facing the interaction between knowledge and power in the context of globalisation poses serious challenges. Different definitions of 'good' exist in Chinese and Western civilisations, not to mention in the era of AI, whether humanity can simultaneously move towards 'the good' remains uncertain.

The third pattern: Lutheran tripartite anthropological mode

This mode views human as the unity of flesh, soul and spirit. In the flesh aspect, the future fact might be that AI designed by 1% human beings can surpass the capabilities of 99% people, but we cannot ensure whether such a potential future is good or bad for human beings. Although AI can help and bless human beings in many ways, it can also harm and even destroy human beings. It needs to consider the aspect of soul, where the attributes of intelligence such as reason, emotion, desire or will are involved. The ethic value or worldview in this aspect will help people use AI positively and correctly rather than negatively and wrongly. When we talk about what is correct and wrong for human essence, we may refer to Luher'sconcept of spirit.

The characteristics of artificial intelligence in the current Chinese context

This can be described in two core words: 'omnipotence' and 'omnibenevolence'.

Humanity progresses towards 'omnipotence'

Even though true omnipotence has not yet been achieved, the fundamental 'goodness' or 'evil' of human nature remains unchanged. This presents a significant challenge. A century ago, 'the earth exploding' was merely a religious concept, mythological legend, or fantasy imagined by artists, novelists, poets, and writers. Today, with the existence of nuclear weapons, atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, and similar other weapons of mass destruction worldwide, the capability exists to obliterate the earth multiple times over. Therefore, 'doomsday' has become an urgent issue in sociology, political science, current affairs, and humanities, and it is no longer confined to theoretical or abstract religious realms. This juxtaposition of human capability and moral implications raises conflicts that need resolution.

Humanity has not yet progressed towards 'omnibenevolence'

The widespread adoption of AI and big data (Harari 2017b:1–20), particularly in China, has intensified with the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2019. This has led to stringent surveillance measures, with individuals being closely monitored through health codes and facial recognition technology wherever they go. Consequently, individuals have been reduced to mere data points, neglecting the intellect, knowledge, and individual will, and instead focusing solely on sensory experiences. The significant change brought about by AI is the transformation of humans into 'captive animals', akin to the transition from wild animals to livestock in primitive societies transitioning to agricultural societies. Now, AI has transformed free individuals into captive data points, receiving sustenance for their body, mind, and soul from the offerings and indoctrination of AI. Harari emphasises that while humans previously used reason for thinking, judgement, and seeking truth, or as a tool for calculating and pursuing their self-interest, now they are primarily focused on seeking sensory pleasure to the point of addiction. Consequently, people spend a considerable amount of time on online platforms like TikTok, WeChat, and internet games, consuming their lives in pursuit of sensory gratification. The memory and reasoning capabilities of big data surpass those of humans, enabling them to brainwash, monitor, and alienate individuals. This control extends beyond the physical and material realm to deprive individuals of their freedom of will through guidance and brainwashing. There are many issues arising from this. What is the essence of humanity? What distinguishes humans from animals, plants, or machines? The Judeo-Christian tradition defines the essence of humanity through the 'image of God' and attributes dignity and sanctity to it. What can God or Heaven bestow upon the essence of humanity? Various religious and ideological beliefs harbour the notion of 'becoming divine', such as the concept of 'immortality' in Taoism, the 'immortality' pursued by Emperor Qin, 'enlightenment' in Buddhism, 'sainthood' in Confucianism, 'justification' and 'eternal life' in Christianity, and the idea of 'integration with heaven' in Confucianism (Huang 2015). All these indicate a pursuit of 'omnipotence' and 'omnibenevolence' in the development of human thought. Despite this historical trajectory, the question remains: Is humanity progressing towards 'omnibenevolence' alongside its rapid advancement towards 'omnipotence'?

Chinese tradition and current universal humanism are too optimistic for human nature

Without accepting or even referring to Luther's theory that even a Christian is simultaneously righteous and sinful [*simul justus et peccator*] (WA 1883:259), Chinese culture and contemporary humanism are usually too optimistic for human omnibenevolence. In the current big data era, AI and robots lack emotions, morals, or a sense of good and evil; they operate solely based on objectives and efficiency. The designers of AI set a goal and employ all means to ensure its effective realisation without enough consideration for the moral dilemmas it may cause. This pursuit of 'omnipotence', characterised by unlimited development, raises questions about its relationship with 'omnibenevolence'. Without considering the spirit of human beings, who are simultaneously righteous and sinful, Chinese culture and

contemporary humanism cannot solve the potential conflict. This inquiry is crucial for the future of humanity and necessitates interdisciplinary research combining religious studies and humanities.

How to avoid the conflict between 'omnipotence' and 'omnibenevolence' from causing disasters for the future of humanity?

The future may present a challenge where humanity is moving towards 'omnipotence' (all powerful) while unable to achieve 'omnibenevolence' (all good willing) (Hoffman & Rosenkrantz 2002:5–8). As recounted in the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible, humanity once united to build a tower hoping to reach heaven. To thwart their plans, God caused them to speak different languages, preventing communication, and dispersing them, thus preventing the completion of the Tower of Babel. In a sense, humanity is once again building the Tower of Babel worldwide, this time using AI. However, several issues arise: (1) the conflict between the morality of the designers of AI or robots and the outcomes they produce; (2) whether the created robots or AI correctly interpret and accept the intentions of their designers and creators is uncertain; (3) whether AI or robots will evolve on their own. For example, with the introduction of autonomous vehicles, which are already being tested and will soon be widespread, ethical dilemmas arise. Tesla, Elon Musk's company, has a factory in Shanghai where self-driving cars equipped with AI navigate the roads according to certain rules. However, when faced with a situation where a decision must be taken, such as choosing between hitting an elderly person or a child who is not following the rules, how will it decide? Will the machine evolve on its own according to its programming? Is its decision ethical? What is the ethical standard – is it traditional human ethics or a new ethics for the era of AI? Is it Chinese ethics or Western ethics? Such phenomena will inevitably occur and need to be addressed (Huang & Cai 2018).

Therefore, we must ponder: 'What is the essence of humanity?' All of this leads us to question whether we are losing our freedom or forcing us to consider what humans ultimately want to do. Considering Luther's views on the three aspects of flesh, soul and spirit may lead us to understand the essence of humanity, so that we may find out the benefits and dangers of AI to humanity. In the future, humans will face a conflict between omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Currently, humans are gradually increasing their capabilities larger, faster, and more efficient. But is humanity progressing towards goodness? If a designer has a malicious purpose and implants chips into our brains, turning us into puppets to paint, count, or become ruthless killers, even with beautiful appearances but lacking kindness and freedom of choice, what then?

Conclusion

The mainstream of Chinese context is humanism, and Luther's tripartite anthropology can help us realise the conflict between 'omnibenevolence' and 'omnipotence' to study interdisciplinarily in religion, humanities, and science to explore whether it will bring threats, disasters, immortality, eternity, or blessings to humanity. We need to understand the essence of humanity by referring to Luther's anthropology from the viewpoints of flesh, soul and spirit, as ethical and moral standards, thus, we may ensure that humanity does not face extinction while maintaining its innovative capabilities. Analysing the impact of AI on the future history of human power and knowledge from this perspective highlights the necessity of studying humanity from philosophical and theological perspectives. Through ethical and legal constraints, we must ensure that human capabilities are used for good rather than evil. AI's challenge to human survival needs to be studied in the viewpoint of intellectual history.

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