

Great Wisdom Holds the Answers to Human Suffering—Artificial Intelligence Inspired Thinking



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What Is the Fundamental Nature of Humans

The fundamental nature of the universe at large and all that it contains is Beingness. Being manifests in myriad ways throughout the universe. Without Being, there would be no universe or its infinite forms. Humans are one of such forms in the universe, therefore the essence of humans is, of course, Being. There can be no humans without Being; humans are manifestations of Being. Humans innately possess the capacities to “perceive”, “think”, and “act”, which in their function result in “perception”, “thought”, and “action”.

Why, when we discuss humankind’s fundamental nature, must we first mention Beingness? Because Beingness refers to the essential nature of all existence. When people discuss what it is to be a human being, they usually do so through the lens of human capacity, that is, the capacity for perception, thought, and action. Based on their perceptions, they make inferences and judgments that ultimately lead to disparate conceptions of humans. There is, however, a critical point to note: when there is no perception, thought, or action whatsoever, Being does not simply disappear. Therefore, based on perception, thought, and action, one cannot tell what Being is. Being is not the result of perception, thought, or action; just the reverse, it is the source of them; and the capacity of perception makes it possible to perceive the universe in its infinite forms. In other words, Being is the precondition for human functions and their effects; without Being, there can be no functions or the attendant effects. Being expresses in functions, and functions are the manifestations of

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Being. Being and its functions are inseparably unitary. This inextricable relationship between Being, and its functions and their attendant effects can be understood as similar to that of a mirror and the images in it: while the images appear, disappear, and morph, the mirror remains unchanging and unmoving.

It is important to realize that all perceived changes in the myriad things of the world, inclusive of human birth, aging, sickness, and death, are distinct functions manifested by Being, and do not signify emergence, cessation, or any change of the Beingness of humans. Similarly, thinking with its stream of ideas, and performing myriad actions, are all manifestations of Being, and do not signify emergence, cessation, or any change of the Beingness of humans. Since the Beingness underlying the functions of perceiving, thinking and acting does not change, it cannot be said that Being undergoes birth, aging, sickness and death; at the same time, since Being manifests in multitudinous activities, it cannot be said that the phenomenon of change in this world does not exist. People invariably perceive the universe through the immutable capacity and function of perceiving, and actively employ thinking and acting, thereby enacting the value of being human. If we take the perceived infinit forms of universe as existence in totality, then we inevitably become attached to the illusory phenomena, neglecting Being and its capacities. If the physical body is taken as self, which is subject to birth, aging, sickness and death, and all of these seem to be independent of human will, then we have to resign ourselves to such inevitable “fate”. Conversely, if we can understand that Being is the true owner of our functions of perceiving, thinking, and acting, and that it is without beginning or end, then any notion of fate with birth, aging, sickness or death will be instantaneously extinguished. We can also exercise our autonomy over whether and how we use our capacities. Our mind will be free and unhindered, and we will perceive, think and act in complete freedom.

In brief, Being never began at any point in the past nor will end anytime in the future. It is ever-existing. It is free from change yet can effect changes; in other words, it is unchanging yet changing, changing yet unchanging, completely free and *zizai* (自在 in Chinese means at ease; in this context it also means innate and independent self-existence and joy).

Pitfalls of Understanding the World by Perceptions

The important questions that we must ask are: who perceives the world? Is the capacity for perception produced by what is perceived? Could what is perceived really be perceiving? Do the world and human body in our conception result from the function of perceiving, or do the perceived world and human body produce the function of perceiving?

Think about people who wear glasses. If with their glasses on, they recognize the world in one way, then if they take them off, what do they perceive? Surely, it has to be different from what they see when wearing the glasses. So, which of these perceived worlds—the one seen through the glasses or the one seen without them—is the real one? Even without glasses, observing the world through our eyes alone

provides varying perspectives—what we see in childhood is different from what we see in old age, and what we see when we are ill differs from what we see when we are healthy. Even our left eye sees differently from our right eye... So, which version of what we perceive is the true one? Which one really exists? And if all of them are real, which of those worlds do “I” live in? Are we really suggesting that the world seen through spectacles is what creates unspectacled people? Clearly, there is one rational conclusion to be drawn from this: none of these perceived worlds is *real* existence. Therefore, whatever judgment on existence based on perceptions is simply not true. In the words of the Buddha, the world of our perceptions is “like a dream, like an illusion”; as stated in Diamond Sutra, “all that has form is illusory and unreal.”

Mistaking the illusory for the real constitutes a subjective fabrication of the self and the world, i.e., a postulated self and a postulated world. The former is born, ages, gets sick, and eventually dies; the latter undergoes constant changes. When the subjective consciousness interprets both as real, the subject unavoidably becomes lost in the afflictions fabricated by its own subjectivity.

If we persist in believing that the human body is “self”, then we cannot but experience the woes born of birth, aging, sickness and death; if we seek to possess things in this temporal and spatial world, then our efforts will be relentlessly thwarted by change and impermanence; if we desire sense-perceptive satisfaction, then we are banishing ourselves to the endless flux of joy and suffering. There arises the illusion that “I” am living through changing time and space, experiencing birth, death, sickness and aging as well as the suffering they bring; when one life comes to an end, another begins, the cycle of birth, death and suffering goes on; life after life will pass without end, such is the so-called cycle of reincarnation.

How to Evaluate Human Life

If what the self is, or is not, is no longer defined according to human capacity, and our comprehension of Being (i.e. Origin, self-nature) is without distortion, we would then have attained the truly great wisdom, a wisdom that Buddhist Dharma describes as “seeing self-nature” (*jianxing* 见性). Being has neither emergence nor cessation, such is the essential nature of Being, and it is also the essential nature of humans.

With such great wisdom, we will approach all our functions and their results from the basis of Being. What is brilliant is that, our functions—perception, thought, and action—which inhere in Being, can then be employed to change our lives, others’ lives, and even the world. Therein lies the value of being human.

Otherwise, by regarding life as a process of birth, aging, sickness, and death, a process which is in full swing today and over tomorrow, we limit life’s significance to the process itself or to what we can pass on to future generations. This is an incomplete view of life. The values that we assign our dreamlike and illusory perceptions are themselves dreamlike and illusory, no matter how or why we pursue them. Whereas for those awakened ones, Being is ever-existing, and there really is no such thing as birth, aging, sickness, or death. They understand Being generates all sorts of functions that each ends as it begins, and in the same instant. They know that the results of

these functions, which endure as memories, were mere nominal conceptualizations, and wield no substantive influence on Being. If we can become like them, we too will no longer discriminate, cling to anything, or have delusional thoughts; we will no longer have to bear the suffering that ignorance brings.

Once we are enlightened, we will realize that all along the greatest value in life has been about freedom and *zizai*. *Zizai* is without beginning or end, with innate and self-existing joy; freedom is about being unfettered by the illusory realm of our perceptions. To have neither birth nor death, to be free and *zizai*, isn't this the highest value for all beings?

Humanity's value, therefore, does not only lie in creation, but more importantly in discovery and awakening. Once we realize this, it becomes clear that life's significance is found in awakening ourselves, returning to complete freedom and *zizai* once and for all, and in guiding others to achieve the same.

In short, Being itself determines the Beingness and its capacities. Disregarding Being and its innate capacities in our search for life's value and significance is pure ignorance.

How the Wise View the Myriad Things of the World

Humans are just one of the myriad things in the universe which are manifestations of Being through its innate capacities. Universe in its infinite forms including animals, plants, microorganisms, and minerals are all distinct manifestations of Being.

Being expresses itself in humans as our ability to perceive, think and act, and it expresses differently in animals. How then does Being manifest in flora, microorganisms, and minerals? People tend to find such questions challenging. In fact, if we approach the question from the perspective of Being, and on the basis of Being's innate capacities and functions, then we will recognize that everything is simply an expression of Being. Because humans derive our perception of the world via our senses, we mistake the part as the whole and regard the illusory as the real. Instead, we shall approach such questions from the perspective of Being, its capacities and functions, and in accordance with the law of cause and effect which these functions give rise to.

How Should We Approach AI's Value and Significance

All discussions divorced from Being are invalid. We have to realize that everything we perceive is a manifestation of functions of Being. It is fine to say that such manifestations are the results of human actions. However, we should bear in mind that what have been perceived as human actions are in fact expressions of Being. To borrow the language of Buddhist Dharma, this life results from karma, which are expressions of Being. Further functions based on the manifestations of karma are

still functions of Being. Needless to say, artificial intelligence (AI) is also a product of the functions of Being.

It is possible to feel happy in our dreams, however, such happiness cannot be grasped or sustained. Similarly, if we perceive humanity and the universe without taking into account the essential nature, we would effectively be searching for value and significance in a dream. People have different dreams: some are engaged in their individual “little self” and others serve a collective “greater self”; each “self” has its own values to realize. But in pursuing them, we are no different from the “self” in a dream. Therefore, it is vital that we awaken. Once awakened, we will give full rein to our innate capacities. This, we will discover, is the greatest beauty and the greatest joy possible; it is the ultimate value and significance of being human; and such beauty and joy is ever-existing and inherent in all of us.

So, what of our pursuits? To address this question from the perspective of the great wisdom, instead of pursuing more, the most important thing is to correct the erroneous views formed in our ignorance, dispel karmic effects and fetters, and return to the Truth (Being). Although we experience perceptions and sensations, in which we enjoy and appreciate, we must not grasp them as if they were real. All pursuits are suffering. Do not conflate the ever-existing Being with the transient lot of life; do not confuse the innate and independent freedom and *zizai* with futile pursuits in a dream. The value of gold lies not in the gold’s glimmer, but in its being gold.

From the perspective of the great wisdom, we approach AI with ease, and in accordance with ever changing circumstances (*suiyuanzizai* 随缘自在 in Chinese). In other words, we neither painstakingly advocate its development, nor outright reject it. The value of those with the great wisdom is to help others to awaken and become free and *zizai*. To achieve this, the awakened ones would broadly foster amicable connections by living, working, and socializing with others, and in doing so, guide them toward enlightenment. Once awakened, people will no longer uncompromisingly cling to their previous pursuits, including those related to the development of AI. Of course, like we need to eat and dress, developing AI may be a necessity for humans which can make life better. We would not reject anything that humans need and can make life better and more beautiful. Buddhist Dharma talks both of complete liberation and of the wondrous effect the wisdom has on life and work; in no way are these paradoxical. The awakened ones would use supramundane wisdom in leading a worldly life, be at ease with changing circumstances, foster amicable connections broadly, and guide all sentient beings toward liberation.

What the Development of Human-Like AI and Super-Intelligence Will Mean for Humankind

Humankind’s intent behind creating AI machines, whatever their level of intelligence, should be in service of humankind. Were intelligent machines used to harm

humankind, that would be terrifying. However, the harmful agent in that instance, would not be the machines, but humans.

Humans and this world are the result of cause and effect; whatever karma we get is our own making. The reality is, whether we develop intelligent machines or not, humanity cannot escape the law of emergence and extinction. This world that humanity lives in will inevitably reach an end too. At that point who will save us? It is only we who can save ourselves. To do so, we must achieve enlightenment, which is the sole path to solving humankind's problems once and for all. Some may say that we can use AI and biological engineering to make humankind immortal. But if an immortal individual is not the true self, but merely a mask of the true self living in illusion and confusion, such life can have no significance; it is at most a game.

Once enlightened, all beings will discover that even self-destruction is not possible. As Being has no emergence or cessation, its functions, no matter how they are employed and no matter what results they produce, cannot lead to the destruction of Being itself. Of course, humankind should use AI for rational ends, but even if AI were used to harm humankind, the enlightened ones would remain unfazed.

Whether AI Will Possess Consciousness and Become Living Beings

The original purpose of AI is to aid humankind, and it is a tool for our own service. It does not fear hard work, functions with high efficiency, requires no recompense, is unselfish, and possesses no consciousness.

Humans can be aware without dwelling on awareness, exert themselves without self-clinging, take actions without attachment to the act nor the result. Can intelligent machines be built to accomplish the same?

Being has neither beginning nor end. It can produce consciousness. How can human consciousness, which has beginning and end, create ever-existing Being, and then produce consciousness? The emergence and cessation of consciousness are not caused by consciousness itself. Therefore, how can AI, which has been designed and produced by human consciousness, and is not even human consciousness, develop consciousness?

Machines cannot possess independent consciousness. Their so-called perceptual capacity, calculative function, and analytical ability are no more than extensions of humans' corresponding competences. Without human initiation, machines cannot of their own accord generate these abilities. AI is simply a concept born of human consciousness. Outside human consciousness, no such concept exists.

All lives are matters of conceptions. For example, people might consider rabbits adorable creatures, but would rabbits agree with this notion? Do rats, which humans consider repulsive, jump at the very sight of themselves? Likewise, humans are free to regard machines as living beings, but it is humans who endow them with such

notion. In reality though, this is an entirely human perspective, nothing more than a notion that we have established.

Man–Machine Relationship and Its Ethics

Machinery cannot of its own accord produce human intelligence and emotion. Even if we were to “graft” human intelligence and emotion into machines, they still would not truly possess these capacities and feelings. Therefore, machinery can only ever be a tool. For people to treat machines as living beings, it boils down to nothing more than an expression of our consciousness and emotions. Our relationship with machines is tantamount to our relationship with things; it resembles that of the mind and the body.

People worry that when AI becomes highly advanced, intelligent machines will acquire emotions and possibly turn on their creators, attempting to harm, and even destroy humankind. This worry has given rise to serious ethical questions. Yet, first of all, machines cannot truly possess human consciousness; and secondly, if humans do not attain enlightenment, we cannot fundamentally solve ethical problems anyway. Even without intelligent machinery, unresolved ethical issues abound. Every stage of human history has presented its own set of moral quandaries, none of which has been fundamentally solved. Besides, humankind still faces significant existential dilemmas such as natural disasters. The potential problems posed by AI are thus a small part by comparison. Therefore, we must prioritize addressing vital questions about the fundamental nature of humans, and the value and significance of human life.

Concluding Thoughts

Whether AI is developed or not, and whether it is developed in one way or another, makes no difference to Being. However, enlightened persons can certainly deploy AI to the benefit of humankind and all other sentient beings, and guide them toward enlightenment. If the question of AI leads us to the truth of the universe and life, then that is where true value lies. Remember: dealing with the perceived world from the basis of Being, making wise use of our capacity, and giving full expression to our innate independent freedom and *zizai*—this is the embodiment of true human value and significance.

Let me end by sharing a story that is not a story:

In a dream realm, a person decides to perform a study of this dream realm. He conducts tests and experiments, and then writes up an immaculate report about his findings, which he names “Existence”.

A person who is awake reads the report and laughs, then adds a word to the front of the title — Void.

In a waking realm, another awake person performs a study of this waking realm, conducts some tests and experiments, then writes an immaculate report on his findings, which he names “Real”.

When the person in the dream realm reads the report, he laughs and adds a word after the title—Illusory.

Finally, the two reports reach an expert well versed in both dream and waking realms. After reading the reports, the expert smiles, and combines the two reports’ titles: “Real Void and Illusory Existence”.

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