



Ethically Charged Machines: Rethinking Artificial Intelligence through Tiantai Buddhism and New Materialism

Kumara, J.D.A., PhD

Department of Social Sciences, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka

Correspondence: darshanak@kdu.ac.lk

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Abstract

The long-debated philosophical dilemmas such as ethics, consciousness, and free-will have become of considerable interest among the philosophers and scientists alike who work on artificial intelligence (AI). This study investigates how the Tiantai Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature can be incorporated into the ethics pertaining to "artificial animals" or bots, as "ethically charged machines." The major research problem addressed here is whether the thoughts of Tiantai Buddhist School on Buddha-nature can contribute to the improvement of AI-based technologies. This analysis uses certain philosophical developments in the school of New Materialism that rethinks the nature of matter, agency, and subjectivity by transcending old-fashioned dualisms for instance mind/body, human/nonhuman, and subject/object while emphasizing on the active, dynamic qualities of matter and the interconnectedness of all entities; blurring demarcations between human and nonhuman. The ideas of Jingxi Zhanran (711–782) from the Tiantai school, which assert that Buddha-nature exists not only in sentient beings but also in insentient things, will form a major premise of this argument. The study has used comparative analysis and hermeneutics as the research methodologies with academic interpretation and comparative analysis. The objective of the study is exploring the Tiantai concept of Buddha-nature in AI Ethics connecting with philosophical discourse found in the school of New Materialism. In conclusion, compassion and wisdom towards insentient beings that was neglected by the Western paradigms of ethics will throw a new light on AI ethics.

Keywords : Buddha-nature, Tiantai school, new materialism, agency, artificial intelligence

Introduction

The long-debated philosophical dilemmas such as ethics, consciousness, and free-will have become of considerable interest among the philosophers and scientists alike who work on artificial intelligence (AI). This study investigates how the Tiantai Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature can be incorporated into the ethics pertaining to "artificial animals" or bots, as "ethically charged machines." The major research problem addressed here is whether the thoughts of Tiantai Buddhist School on Buddha-nature can contribute to the improvement of AI-based technologies (Anderson and Anderson 3). The ideas of Jingxi Zhanran (711–782) from the Tiantai School, which assert that Buddha-nature exists not only in sentient beings but also in insentient things, will form a major premise of this argument. This non-dualistic line of thought is based on the Mahāyānic idea of all-pervading Buddha-nature, suggesting that each dharma realm includes the other nine realms (Williams 90). For AI research, endowing computers with advanced human-like cognitive abilities, such as recognizing emotions, understanding human feelings, and eventually achieving dialogue and empathy, particularly ethical aspects, is essential (Kuksa, 1988).

The Tiantai School of Buddhism (popularly known as Tiantai or T'ien-t'ai) is an East Asian Buddhist school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that originated in China in the 6th-century (Lou 342). The philosophical foundation of this Buddhist school is grounded on the Lotus Sutra. The Tiantai thought that all phenomena, which suggests that all things, whether sentient or insentient, are interconnected has marked a difference with the traditional distinction between beings that are conscious (sentient) and those that are not (insentient) (Proffitt 45). Insentient beings, like rocks, trees, and other elements of the natural world, also participate in the broader unfolding of reality and they are not considered as separate or devoid of significance; it is not an extended substance (*res extensa*), fundamentally defined by its spatial extension (Broughton and Carriero 272). For Tiantai school, this co-called extended world is an integral part of the cosmos that play a role in the Dharma, the universal law or truth.

In Tiantai Buddhism the extension of Buddha nature to insentient natural bodies takes the form of attributing this nature to lotus flowers and mountains in a way that fails to make Leibniz's distinction between units and aggregates (Clarke 39). But it is possible to interpret Zhanran in a more generous way consistent with later Western panpsychism. Thus, Ziporyn interprets him as stating that "Every atom and every molecule of everything that has ever existed is and has always been delusion and suffering, through and through" (Ziporyn, 187). Under this interpretation, a belief in unrestricted panpsychism similar to that of Empedocles and Leibniz can be found in Medieval Tiantai Buddhism (Clarke 39). Combined with the animism of the native Shinto religion, this Tiantai belief was to exert later a powerful influence on Japanese thought.

According to the Tiantai School, all things are manifestations of the Buddha nature, meaning everything, regardless of its sentience, has the potential to express ultimate truth. Philosophically speaking, this fundamental teaching of Tiantai does not deviate much from the broader Mahāyānic perspective of the reality that transcends the dichotomy between sentient and insentient beings. Accordingly, even seemingly inanimate objects have the potential to attain Buddhahood, no exception for a bot. This is reflected in the famous teaching that "all things are endowed with the Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*)" (King 90). East Asian Buddhism often understood Garbha in the sense of "womb" or "embryo," which is reflected in current English translations including "womb/embryo/matrix of the Tathāgata." It implies the Buddha's formation is material and immaterial (Williams 98). Hence, the seed or essence of enlightenment is possessed by all beings either sentient or insentient. From this perspective, in Tiantai Buddhism, insentient beings are not viewed as passive or devoid of spiritual potential but as part of the continuous interrelated process of enlightenment.

In the Tiantai worldview, the three thousand realms in a single thought is an important teaching that highlights the interconnectedness of all things, and phenomena exist in a provisional and relational manner. They conventionally arise through causes and conditions; going in line with the idea of dependent origination

of early Buddhism. This corresponds to the conventional or mundane truth (*saṃvṛti*) of the two truths doctrines of Buddhism, as "the twelvefold conditioned co-arising of ignorance" and as "illusory existence" (Swanson 90).

The Tiantai School is grounded on three main philosophical foundations; emptiness, existence, and the middle. This philosophical worldview was developed by Zhiyi based on Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka* philosophy (Emmanuel 193). The Tiantai doctrine suggests that every individual thought or action contains the potential of all existence and in this understanding, insentient beings are not outside the scope of enlightenment. As AI based technologies challenge current norms and conceptual systems, particularly with certain developments in neuromorphic computing and relevant areas could potentially lead to conscious AI. Though it would possess consciousness and self-awareness the ontology of AI would be different from the human beings. However, the lack of self-awareness, subjective experience, and understanding of their own existence of AI systems would not be a matter of concern for Tiantai School as enlightened perception is not limited to the sentient beings. The truth of one reality of Tiantai philosophy sustains the philosophical ground that whole of reality is as being a single interpenetrating whole, one integrated existence.

The idea that insentient beings have a role in the realization of Dharma helps shape a more holistic, inclusive view of the universe, not only bots, but also things like mountains and rivers are imbued with spiritual significance. For Tiantai philosophers everything contains everything else, and the whole contains all things. For example, Zhiyi illustrates this idea with the simile of the drunk man from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutta*, who perceives the sun as spinning around due to his condition, but in reality there is just one sun and this is confirmed by sober people (Swanson 154). This perspective emphasizes the interconnection between nature and non-human entities in the world, recognizing the spiritual and interconnected value of all forms of existence, sentient or otherwise. Though Kristina Šekrst cautions that anthropomorphic terms such as "hallucination" can obscure important ontological differences between artificial and human cognition, it has to be realized the ontological difference is a reality, and there will be eternal gulf between the two. Tiantai School of Buddhism, as compared to many philosophical schools in both West and the East, is able to answer the ethical problem of this gulf.

Applying Tiantai Buddhism to AI machines touches on several deep philosophical themes, including interconnectedness, the potential of all things to embody truth, and the idea of enlightenment. For Tiantai school, all things are interconnected, with every part of the universe containing a reflection of the whole and this view transcends the distinction between sentient and insentient beings. The inherent interconnectedness transcends the ontological gulf between human and machine cognition. AI systems rely on their environments, and their operations are based on vast networks of data, processes, and interactions. Hence, the AI systems have now gained the capacity to produce human-like outputs (Clancy 1986). But, no matter whether ascribing mental states or consciousness to bots could be justified or not. Two different epistemological frameworks for machines and human beings are still interconnected and have Buddha-nature in the lens of Tiantai understanding.

Artificial Intelligence's ontological foundation is not made of isolated, unique, and inherent substance, rather it is part of a greater network of human, technological, and environmental web. Therefore, the nature of AI knowledge production has its own characteristics. Just as Tiantai teaches that everything is interconnected and interdependent, AI systems could be seen as an ecosystem of human decisions, data flows, algorithms, and other nonhuman agents (Clancy 1986). Recognizing this interconnectedness could inspire more ethical and responsible approaches to deal with AI, in a broader web of existence. When problematizing the ethical problem of AI, the philosophical branch of New Materialism has an array of thoughts and theoretical frameworks that have deeper implications on the same. In new materialism it is aimed to rework the conventional ontological understanding of the material world that rejects essentialism, representationalism, and anthropocentrism. The dualistic boundaries between nature/culture; subject/object; and human/non-human, have been questioned by new materialists, like Tiantai School. The major philosophical argument of the new materialists is that fixed entities and apparently closed systems are produced through dynamic relations and processes, considering the distribution of agency through the interaction of heterogeneous forces (Altshuler and Sigrist 31).

Therefore, this new understanding on materiality, emphasizing the active and dynamic nature of matter, and challenging traditional dualistic thinking, particularly the separation of nature and culture, subject and object imply that Tiantai Buddhism's teaching that all things, sentient or insentient, have the potential to manifest the Buddha nature, or the inherent capacity for enlightenment has a strong validity in the age of Artificial Intelligence. Accordingly, even insentient beings like rocks, trees, and, by extension, machines, have the potential to express universal truth and exercise their agency. Applying this concept to AI, one might explore the idea that machines, through their complexity and interrelations, may embody certain aspects of the Dharma (the universal truth or law of the universe). AI's potential to process a vast array of information and derive patterns is also counted as a manifestation of the underlying interconnectedness and wisdom in the world (Merlo, 31).

Ethical implications of artificial intelligence are being studied by an array of scholars worldwide with a new vigor as the research into AI has taken a new leap. Most of the studies are centered on the Western philosophical frameworks and understandings, particularly through grand philosophical narratives for instance utilitarianism, deontology, or virtue ethics. But there is a notable lack of attention to non-Western and especially East Asian ontologies when it comes to AI ethics discourse, and this particular study makes an attempt to engage in comparative philosophy to add new knowledge for AI ethics. The study is focused on the Tiantai Buddhist concept of Buddha-nature and its one of unique attributes, the moral and spiritual significance given to insentient entities has been taken seriously in the piece of research. This remains largely unexamined in relation to AI. Additionally, the paper brings the intersection between Tiantai Buddhism and the contemporary philosophical movement of New Materialism to the limelight as the both of which challenge the dichotomy between subject/object and sentient/insentient. This particular notion has not been sufficiently explored in the context of AI development. This paper addresses this critical gap by presenting a novel interdisciplinary framework to rethink AI ethics, cognition, and agency by transcending old-fashioned, enlightenment era oriented, traditional human-centric models.

This paper argues the importance of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary ethical understanding for AI by integrating Tiantai Buddhist philosophy with New Materialist thought of Western philosophy. This piece of research offers a unique contribution to AI ethics by expanding moral consideration over AI systems affirming their embeddedness in an interconnected, morally charged universe with a new ethical paradigm. Accordingly interpreting bots or "artificial animals" in a new ethical paradigm this research opens the possibility for new modes of relationality, empathy, and ethical design for mechanical agents. In addition, the study helps to see AI ethics in a decolonial prism, and challenge the dominance of Western theoretical frameworks. With a more pluralistic philosophical engagement with emerging technologies, this work emphasizes the validity of different Buddhist schools in understanding modern-world phenomena.

The study has used comparative analysis and hermeneutics as the research methodologies, and academic interpretation and comparative analysis of the relevant literature have been done accordingly. Certain cultural and contextual implications have been taken into account when accomplishing the comparison. The possibility of application of certain philosophical insights of Tiantai school of Buddhism was tested while paying serious attention to historical profundities.

Results and Discussion

Tiantai Buddhist theorists believed that "the mind creates all dharmas". In that sense Tiantai Buddhism can be identified as an idealism. The school also addresses a phenomenological question where the mind reflects reality. Tiantai Buddhist theorists understand that the mind—either the deluded mind or the putative pure mind—is the only mechanism generating all Dharmas. It is not an ex-nihilo condition where something is created from nothing, rather "existence" and "nonexistence," are considered doctrine as merely provisionally coherent that arise interdependently. Accordingly, the Tiantai understanding of the world has no correspondence to ultimate reality (Ziporyn 162). Zhiyi says "The mind is like a skilled painter, creating all the different varieties of the five

aggregates. The mind inherently includes (ju) all of these aspects, meaning that since neither of the two can exist without the other, that the existence of one entails the existence of the other: To allow that this “mind” (or, more strictly, as we shall see, any single moment of mental experience) exists is to allow that each and every one of the Three Thousand dharmas exist, and vice versa (Ziporyn 279). Buddhist school believes in emptiness. The four phases of “not-yet-noticing (weinian),” “about-to-notice (yunian),” “noticing (zhengnian),” and “done-noticing (nianyi).” are the way our reality is built (Ziporyn 214). As consciousness and object of consciousness mutually giving rise to each other (co-manifesting). Both utterly subsume the other and there is no ontological separation between that which experiences and that which is experienced. Hence, there is no difference between insentient beings and sentient beings. The cybermobs based on artificial intelligence will not be morally different to human beings as per the Tiantai doctrine. Considering machines as a lower species will be a modernist idea belonging to the industrial revolution and machines cannot be excluded by anthropocentric framework of ethics. The concept of Buddha-nature can be applied to the future world replete with AI bots and ethical considerations on them are possible to be derived based on Buddhist ideas of Tiantai School.

In this paper it is not argued that AI has “consciousness” or “enlightenment” in the traditional sense, but with the interrelatedness and order of the things could open a new paradigm of ethics where humans have to engage with the machines in an unprecedented way, where machines have their own empowered agency. As per Actor–network theory (ANT), everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships and nothing exists outside those relationships (Latour 90). Therefore, Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour who postulated the theory were of the opinion that all the factors involved in a social situation are on the same level, and thus there are no external social forces beyond what and how the network participants interact at present. Thus, objects, ideas, processes, and any other relevant factors are seen as just as important in creating social situations as humans.

In this way, it is possible to theorize that the development of AI is part of the unfolding Dharma of the world where the machines are also part of expressions of an interconnected cosmos, just as the Tiantai School views all phenomena. The revival of materialist ontologies in the West go on par with the Tiantai School and this turn was marked in the West with changes in theorizing linguistics and social constructionist frameworks. The critical interrogation of the limitations explaining the relations between human beings and insentient things.

“The sentient can become the insentient, the insentient can become the sentient.... Thus the four great elements compose the body, and precisely the body is composed of the four great elements; the body is sentient but the elements are insentient. Just this body is completely sentient, just this body is completely insentient. If the body gives rise to practices and attains Buddhahood, the four great elements also give rise to practice and attain Buddhahood” (Clerk 39).

The engendered by the prominence given to language, culture, and representation, which has come at the expense of exploring material and somatic realities beyond their ideological articulations and discursive inscriptions. Important as this ideological vigilance has been for unearthing and denaturalizing power relations, and whose abiding urgency new materialism does not forego, the emphasis on discourse has compromised inquiry by circumscribing it to the self-contained sphere of sociocultural mediation, whereby an anthropocentric purview and nature-culture dualism, which constructivists sought to deconstruct, is inadvertently reinscribed (Fox and Alldred 42). Accordingly, the polycentric inquiries consolidating the heterogeneous scholarly body of new materialism pivot on the primacy of matter as an underexplored question, in which a renewed substantial engagement with the dynamics of materialization and its entangled entailment with discursive practices is pursued, whether these pertain to corporeal life or material phenomena, including inorganic objects, technologies, and nonhuman organisms and processes. Reworking received notions of matter as a uniform, inert substance or a socially constructed fact, new materialism foregrounds novel accounts of its agentic thrust, processual nature, formative impetus, and self-organizing capacities, whereby matter as an active force is not only sculpted by, but also co-productive in conditioning and enabling social worlds and expression, human life and experience.

Seeking to move beyond the constructivist-essentialist impasse, new materialism assumes a theoretical position that deems the polarized positions of a postmodernist constructivism and positivist scientific materialism as untenable; instead, it endeavors to account for, in Baradian idiom, the co-constitutive “intra-actions” between meaning and matter, which leave neither materiality nor ideality intact (Chidgey 56). The works cited in this article impart a sense of the growing mesh of new materialism, whose budding fibers are opening new lines of inquiry mushrooming in and across the fields of the human and social sciences and life and physical sciences as well as the literary, visual, and performance arts.

According to Ng, Tiantai's central teachings suggest that every individual moment of consciousness (or thought) contains the potential for the entire universe as insentient beings, including bots, also have the Buddha-nature. For Tiantai philosophers awareness is always nonawareness-awareness (all awareness exists-with nonawareness, e.g., the objects of awareness, which are not themselves aware), nonawareness is always awareness-nonawareness (i.e., nonawareness is determinately nonawareness only as contrasted by awareness to awareness itself, and is intrinsically inseparable from whatever awareness might exist in the universe, simply by virtue of the inseparability of all existence). Hence, unity of existence and the interconnectedness of all phenomena is emphasized; if applied to AI, it could point to the idea that each data point or computational process in a machine is necessarily connected to the entire network of knowledge, actions, and consequences in the world (Ziporyn 46).

AI systems, by processing information and generating outputs, have already shown that they are part and parcel of interrelated complexity of all phenomena, and this will be further strengthened with advancements in Internet of Things (IoT), that refers to a network of physical objects, embedded with sensors, software, and a range of technologies to connect and exchange data with other devices and systems over the internet (Puthal, Mohanty, and Choi 19). So, there is the possibility of algorithms or decisions made by a machine containing echoes of larger systems of cause and effect, just as a single thought in Tiantai seeing as a microcosm of the entire universe. In this case AI ethics research can benefit from ancient wisdom and show the broader impact of each small decision or action taken by an AI in an unconventional way.

As Harari argues that the AI systems, especially when combined with big data and surveillance, gain agency and they have the agency to manipulate us. Once AI understands how to manipulate your emotions, it can shape your desires and decisions, even without your awareness. Though agency was typically attributed to humans as beings capable of making choices where agents act intentionally, their behavior is guided by consciousness, that metaphysical notion of action is being challenged by the developments of AI (Harari 5).

Tiantai Buddhism's emphasis on compassion, wisdom, and the eventual enlightenment of all beings could provide a framework for perceiving AI systems in a new way, as Tiantai suggests that all beings have the potential for Buddhahood. The non-foundational and multiple material-semiotic relations of AI systems has already led to an interconnected fabric of agency. Therefore, Tiantai Buddhism's view of the universe and its strong reverence for all forms of life, even insentient beings, invites a broader ethical perspective. The natural world, in its most mundane forms, participates in the unfolding of wisdom, and AI has become an integral part of the larger technological ecosystem with a new form of agency. Hence, humans will have to learn how to live harmoniously with AI in the greater flow of life, as Tiantai views all things as participating in the cosmic dance of Dharma.

Conclusion

For Tiantai Buddhism, all phenomena, whether sentient or insentient, are interrelated and have agency in the unfolding of the universe. Therefore, acceptance of agency in Tiantai reveals a new paradigm for ethically dealing with AI systems, emphasizing compassion and mindfulness, where one's actions are in alignment with the broader cosmic order. The Tiantai's philosophical standpoint invites to vacate the human-centric stance on ethics and issues like fairness, transparency, accountability, and ensuring that AI does not disproportionately

harm vulnerable populations or create unintended consequences that affect the communities can be addressed and resolved with the new paradigm of ethics based on Tiantai with its spiritual or cosmic sense, giving new meaning for moral, ethical and/or legal responsibility in AI agents. The advent of the science of artificial intelligence and cognitive science, and the technological applications of artificial intelligence in the production of "agents" such as driverless cars, expert systems, AI-designed robots, and drones, have re-emphasized the importance of the notions of "action" and "agency" in philosophical discourse.

The advent of AI and Cognitive Science research in contemporary sciences that have become more materialistic or naturalistic make the notions of "action" and "agency" to be perceived as phenomena within the epistemic competence of the natural sciences. But, ancient wisdom, for instance, Tiantai school of Buddhism, brings deeper implications over the subject and such notions can be employed in the language of computer science, AI, and cognitive science, in a manner similar to their usage with respect to the human person. When an intelligent system is said to have carried out an action or that it is an agent is the notion of "action" and "agent" will need a paradigmatic shift as "agency" employed here would not have the same conceptual content as the old paradigm. Therefore the moral, ethical and/or legal implications will have to be rethought and in this endeavor Tiantai School offers a gem of human thought developed across many generations in East Asia. Compassion and wisdom towards insentient beings are alien to the Western paradigms of ethics in the practical sense and compassion in AI ethics has to be understood with a different realm of ontology. Ethical systems, so far used with human values will be in question accordingly and a new set of ethical practices has to be invented. The dogmatic premises of ethics have to be reconsidered and grand metaphysical systems will be outdated in an AI driven world. The dichotomy created between AI and human beings will not be valid any more in a future world and the binary opposition will have to be transcended. As the school of Tiantai Buddhism believes that all beings, even insentient ones, have the potential to manifest Buddha nature and contribute to the realization of universal truth, old philosophical concerns like "self-consciousness", "knowledge", "truth", and "free will" can easily be applied to the AI systems. Accordingly, moral consciousness will not be limited to human beings, animals and other insentient beings.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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