

# Humanity in the Era of Revolution 4.0: An Analysis of Artificial Intelligence in the light of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Philosophy of Humanity

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the issue of artificial intelligence in the light of Seyyed Hossein Nasr philosophy of humanity. It looks at the changing definition and understanding of human being in view of the fourth industrial revolution through the traditional society to the renaissance/modern period and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It bases this analysis on the dichotomy between the promethean and pontifical man as espoused in the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and went on to define man anew based on the workings of AI robots in revolution 4.0. Using the qualitative method of critical analysis, it presented the understanding of man as pontifical and promethean as defined by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Thereafter, it puts forward the argument that revolution 4.0 has disrupted our understanding of man in the present time as promethean and there is therefore a need for a new understanding of humanity as form, imagination and creative since reason, articulate speech and upright stand is no longer exclusive to him. Although, the paper suggested a definition, but it further affirms the need to rather return to the definition and understanding of humanity as pontifical as Seyyed Hossein Nasr advised because this may be man's only saving grace in the face of constant disruption to what a human being is.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Humanity, Nasr, Revolution 4.0, Redefining, Robots

## Introduction

The fourth industrial revolution (revolution 4.0) stands for human progress in technological development in cyber-physical system which includes a very high capacity in connectivity, revolutionary development in human-machine interactions, human-machines interfaces, virtual reality systems and advancement in transferring digital instruction to the physical world in the use of robotics, 3D printing, the internet of things, artificial intelligence, cloud computing and big data, renewable energies and others. Industrial revolution 4.0 can be defined "as the integration of intelligent digital technologies into manufacturing and industrial processes" (SAP, 2024, September 4). While the first industrial revolution is based on the development of mechanization – steam and water powered engines and machines, the second industrial revolution is based on mass production of goods and services and the use of electricity. The third industrial revolution sees the development of electronic and IT systems as well as automation of production and things. This fourth industrial revolution which is based on cyber-physical systems seeks to encourage and enhance human productivity, efficiency and flexibility while at the same time enabling high intelligent decision-making and customization in manufacturing and supply chain operation (SAP, 2024, September 4). In the words of Daniel Burrus, ".....industrial revolution 4.0 transformations allow us to work alongside machines in new, highly productive ways" (cited in SAP, 2024, September 4).

Making machines work with humans in an intelligent way requires the use of an intelligent order which could match human intelligence in a collaborative way to enhance productivity, efficiency and produce effective results; thus, here is where artificial intelligence (AI) and humanity becomes

important in the discourse. Although etymologically the words artificial intelligence and humanity differs and there seems to be no intersection between them. However, a closer look at the definition of both suggest a fundamental synonym between them. Granted that artificial intelligence works in computers and machines such as robots while human being is a biological animal (bones and flesh) which differs from irons and wires that makes a computer or robot. Nonetheless, the definition of artificial intelligence as having the ability “to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings (such as human beings)” (Copeland, 2024, September 2) makes it to be fundamentally similar to humans and herein lies the issue. According to some definition of AI, it is said to be “the simulation of human intelligence in machines that are programmed to think and act like humans. Learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and language comprehension are all examples of cognitive abilities” (Duggal, 2024, September 4) that it shares with human beings. In other words, AI is designed to be as intelligent as human beings and is, in fact, akin to a human being. This point will be further developed and discussed in this paper in what is to come below.

Moving on to the understanding of humanity. In order to do justice to this concept, one has to go back to history to better understand the changing concept of what it is to be human philosophically – hence, this will be presented below as follow.

The Renaissance was a period of great change in Europe as it marks the eclipse of the traditional societies in that part of the world. It was a period in which, in addition to having encountered the Islamic civilization and got to know about how Muslim scholars had interacted with Greek philosophy, a lot of hitherto unknown manuscripts of ancient philosophers came into circulation and marks a reawakening in knowledge in Europe hence the term – Renaissance. This reawakening led to the estrangement of the Church from the scholars who specialises in science and philosophy as many of the beliefs propagated by the Christian Church came under serious attack from the scientists and philosophers of the time because they posit that these beliefs are questionable and they are not grounded in knowledge - rationalism and empirical evidence. Hence, this led to a lot of upheavals including the inquisition and the eventual break away of scientific knowledge, including philosophy, from religion as well as the breakaway of the state from the Church (the rise of secularism).

In view of the above, beliefs in the creation and origin of man as propagated by the Church came under scrutiny in science and philosophy and since these beliefs are not based on rational and empirical evidence, they were roundly rejected by scholars at that time. Thus, began the task of redefining and re-understanding man from the point of view of the new mode of knowing at that time – science and philosophy.

Although, the development of the theory of evolution preceded Charles Darwin, nonetheless, his idea as articulated in his book – *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* – provided a breakthrough for the scientists and the philosophers in their quest to redefine and re-understand humanity. With this theory that says that things evolved by means of natural selection and survival of the fittest and were not created as previously understood in traditional societies, man came to be redefined and understood as an animal that evolved over a long period of time to become what he is

today. In other words, man was not created by God; rather, he evolved from small biological specie to become Homo sapiens which is the highest of the other homos that evolved from this biological specie. Therefore, man was redefined in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as "a man, woman, or child of the species *Homo sapiens*, distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright stance" (Encyclopaedia, encyclopedia.com). Thus, instead of saying man is a creation of God who has been imbued with knowledge to do the will of God on earth as preached by the Church and understood in traditional societies, he was redefined as a being that evolved over a long period of time and thus independent of God and the will of God. In other words, man evolved to Homo sapiens and thus could choose his purpose on earth on his own term without any reference to God or any divine being.

It was against this background and this new understanding of humanity in the Renaissance that Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote his book *Religion and the Order of Nature* where he showcases how this new understanding of man has affected the relationship between man and God as well as between man and his environment (including other creatures in the environment). It is also in the light of this definition and understanding of man in the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the modern period that I argued in what is to come below that even this definition of humanity which has prevailed from the time of the Renaissance has been disrupted by the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Robots and it is in need of a revision. Moreover, while I provided what we could possibly piece together as the new definition of humanity in this revolution 4.0, I, nonetheless, argued that going back to the re-understanding of man as pontifical (as posited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr) may be our saving grace in this era of AI in robots.

### **A Brief Review of some of Nasr's Writings on the Idea and Conception of Humanity**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a scholar who has shown tremendous concern with the idea of man and his society, man's conception of himself, his relationship with the sacred and tradition (understood as religions) and his relation to other ontological entities in the universe. To put this in proper perspective, one can say that Nasr is a scholar who, like his Muslim contemporaries, sees the danger that modernism embodied and has been warning humanity about the catastrophe that is to befall man as a result of the adoption of the modern worldview. In other words, Nasr sees the change, idealism and philosophy heralded by modernism as the major problem of man in the contemporary time. He was among the very first scholar to warn about the danger inherent in the use of fossil fuel when it was first discovered. In his book, *The need for a sacred science*, Nasr highlights the problem of science and technology which is the driving force behind modernism and which unfortunately is devoid of the idea of the sacred. He analyses what that science and technology portend for humanity and his ontological status in the world. He condemned the modern view of science which changes the way man relates with the universe because this science sees the universe as a phenomenon to be conquered, subjugated and exploited. This becomes possible because of the reinterpretation of the role of man as the master of the universe answerable to no one. In another of his work, *Traditional Islam in the modern world*, Nasr was able to catalogue the different dimensions of how the reinterpretation of

humanity based on the modern worldview is affecting man and his society. Here, he explained the problematic conception of man "as a purely earthly creature and master of nature, who is responsible to no one but himself" (Owoyemi, 2011) and as a "being 'free' of heaven, complete master of his own destiny, earth-bound but also master of the earth, oblivious to all eschatological realities..." (Nasr, 1987; 103). In his other book, *Knowledge and the sacred*, Nasr explained how this conception of man affects human knowledge because instead of placing God at the centre of everything as was the case in Traditional societies, it removed God and placed man at the centre thus "man becomes the measure of all things" (Owoyemi, 2011 & Nasr, 1987; 100). This according to him laid the ground for the idea of the conquest of nature, its subjugation and exploitation by man. Furthermore, in his works entitled *The encounter of man and nature: the spiritual crisis of modern man* and *The spiritual and religious dimension of the environmental crisis* Nasr was able to put in view the environmental crisis that the conception of man in modern period has resulted into and typical of him, he not only highlighted these problems, he provided solutions to them which he hinges on the redefinition of man and his re-understanding of himself as not just a physical being but a spiritual being as well and a bridge between heaven and earth. In another of his work, *Islam and the plight of modern man*, Nasr explained how Islam could help man modern man to re-understand himself and his humanity as well as his role in the world in contrast to how he has been portrayed and made to live by modernism. Finally, in his work, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, Nasr took us back to the origin of the problem and critically analysed everything that is wrong with the reinterpretation of humanity that happened in the period of the Renaissance which heralded the birth of modernism. He pointed out that it was during this period that man starts to get it wrong and this culminated in modernism where man reached the point of no return as this led to the various problems that humanity is currently facing.

This work, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, will be the primary focus of this paper in what is to come below because it is here that we are able to have a full grasp of the changing conception of man from the traditional period to the present time.

### **Nasr's Philosophy of Humanity and the Changing view of Humanity**

According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, prior to the period of the Renaissance, traditional societies east and west see man as pontifical – that is, a bridge between Heaven and earth. He posits that man was held as that which links the Heaven and earth together as he was seen as the khalifa/implementer of the WILL of Heaven on earth (Nasr, 1996: 163). In this sense, he says, man was a special being possessing both spiritual and material nature that adequately defines his duty as a vicegerent of God. However, with the advent of the Renaissance and the rise of the scientific revolution, this view of man changed drastically and Promethean man became the order of the day. By Promethean, Nasr meant that man removed God from the centre of his universe and replaced God with himself as "the be" all and decider of everything on earth (Nasr, 1996: 163). In other words, man cuts himself off from Heaven and sees the earth as his domain to be conquered and subjugated to his will and not the Will of Heaven. He points out that, with the scientific revolution, man seeks total dominion over the earth on his own

terms without reference to the WILL of Heaven (Nasr, 1996: 126 - 162). To further solidify this new humanism, Nasr explains, in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, that in the modern period, human rationalism becomes the almighty determinant of all things in human society. To be human, you have to be rationally independent from all knowledge, beliefs, dogmas and superstitions espoused by the traditional society. Man's humanity came to be defined based on his ability to reason especially without the aid of faith (Nasr, 1989: 160). Thus, Nasr says, this led to a situation in which what is known as a human being changed drastically and this change not only affected how he looks at himself but how he also looks at his environment and other creatures in it. This promethean view of man, he posits, led to the environmental crisis that we are currently experiencing and this is not going to change until this view of man is abandoned altogether.

However, despite Nasr's warning, this trend continues until the post-modern period when rationalism itself was challenged as being inadequate in determining man and his society. The post-modernist sees the reduction of everything to rationalism as too narrow and are in fact sceptical about its claim to authority over other forms of narratives. In other words, post-modernism removed man from the centre of everything but instead of returning to the concept of pontifical man as Nasr had canvassed for, it accepted that anything could be placed at the centre and not necessarily God as in traditional society. Thus, man is not the lord and emperor of everything as previously thought but neither is God reckoned with in this new worldview. This period marks a situation in which, while the definition of man remains what it was during the Renaissance to the modern period, his major description as having superior rationality to tackle all problems becomes questionable and unacceptable. Scepticism, subjectivism and relativism become the order of the day and man was left without a direction. This new understanding sees man as a wanderer without any particular direction. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the advent of the computer, internet, and other information technology tools, the idea of man and his society also changed drastically especially with the rise of the idea of globalization. In this period, man was no longer defined within his small enclave as a being in communion with his immediate environment; he became a global citizen with interest far and wide beyond his physical boundaries. He became a global man not defined by his immediate environment but by what and who he is able to connect with globally while remaining in his abode physically.

Furthermore, this issue has become complicated in the contemporary time with the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its use in robot building. The definition of man is again being called into question as these robots are as efficient, articulate and intelligent as man if not more than man. Thus, in the face of this new development, what is a human being? This question becomes necessary because if AI robot is akin to a human being, there has to be something which will differentiate man from AI robot.

### **Re-understanding a Human Being in the Era of AI**

As asserted above, according to Nasr, in traditional societies, a human being is understood to be a pontifical being who is defined severally as an image of God or a vicegerent of God or as a part of God or as a sentient being capable of attaining to enlightenment which means his ascent back to Heaven or the Divine. In all these definitions, what is apparent is the fact of man's tie to Heaven or the Divine. With this understanding man was seen in the traditional societies as a bridge between heaven and earth. In fact, to expound this further in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) man's life on earth is for a short time, and his final abode is heaven or hell according to his deeds on earth. After man's death, he will be brought back to life on a day called a Day of Judgment and on that day, he will give account of his stewardship on earth. If he was able to serve God, as he has been commanded to do, and carried out his duties sincerely in his relationship with his fellow men and everything in his environment pleasing God, he will be admitted to paradise where he will live forever. On the other hand, if he failed in his worship of God and in his relationship with his fellow men and other things in his environment, he will be punished in Hellfire where he will live for some time or forever based on the extent of his failure on earth and whether he has any belief about the existence of God (see Abdul Latif, 2002: 74–96; Nomani, 1978: 80–100; Rahman, 1999: 106–120).

However, from the time of the Renaissance through to the modern period, as Nasr explains, this concept of man in the traditional societies was put to serious test and undergoes a radical change as a result of the different revolutions in human society that started with the Renaissance. Likewise, the revolt of the scientists and philosophers against the Church from the period of the Renaissance to the modern period also calls for a situation in which everything, humans, society, the cosmos etc. has to be redefined in the face of this new change because the Church that had hitherto defined all things from the perspective of religion has been rejected (Nasr, 1996: 163–190). There was therefore a need to redefine and re-understand things anew in the light of the change in worldview.

Thus, in the light of the above, since the seventeenth century when men became 'enlightened' and rejected the traditional definition of man, which is based on revelation, modern man has been grappling with the problem of redefining man and tracing his origin (and the origin of the universe) since, to the modern thinkers, the creationist story of religion does not make 'sense' and cannot stand the test of 'reason' and empirical evidence.

However, in 1859, Charles Darwin provided modern man with the evolutionary theory in which he postulates that man evolved from lower animals to higher animal through the process of natural selection and survival of the fittest (see Darwin, 1993 & Harris, 1988). Thus, through this theory, modern man has since held on to the view that the origin of man lies in evolution through natural selection and with this understanding man was seen as an independent being who has developed or evolved a process of thought (reason) naturally and thus, he should be defined in accordance with his ability to think. Baron d'Holbach, one of the modern thinkers, says, concerning the use of reason by human being: "The *enlightened man*, is man in his maturity, in his perfection; who is capable of pursuing his own happiness; because he has learned *to examine, to think for himself*, and not to take

that for truth upon the authority of others, which experience has taught him examination will frequently prove erroneous..." (Sherman, 2000: 136). Likewise, Thomas Paine advocated the need to reject traditional institutions and to use reason to decide what is true or false for oneself: "*My own mind is my own church*. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit" (Sherman, 2000: 142-143).

In the light of this rejection of the traditional definition of man and the rise of 'reason', human being came to be defined as "a man, woman, or child of the species *Homo sapiens*, distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright stance" (Encyclopaedia, encyclopedia.com). To put it succinctly, a human being means a perceiving person who could reason, produce articulated speech and stand upright. Although, this definition could be problematic and in fact it has given rise to a lot of questions in the field of philosophy because of its limiting criteria of what human beings are? Fundamentally philosophers have asked questions such as whether those who are incapable of reasoning, lack the ability to articulate speech or are notable to stand upright because of deformity are human beings or not (Pojman, 1999: 146–149). These questions have not been satisfactorily answered by philosophers till the contemporary time. Thus, with the rise of AI in robots and machines, these questions have become more complicated and this definition of human being is even more problematic now because AI robots are able to reason, produce articulate speech and walk erect like human beings.

However, one of the solutions to these questions is that provided by Aristotle with his idea of potentiality and actuality. According to him, humans have the ability to reason, speak and stand erect potentially and not actually. Thus, it means that these qualities are held by man potentially and he may actualise them or may not actualise them (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012: 77–79). But, when we talk about a human being, he says, we know him by his *form*. According to him, we necessarily *recognise* the *form* of a human being when we see one and this form differentiates him from other creatures. In the words of Plato, we know this *form* of the perfect human being in the World of Forms before we are created into this world which is a carbon copy of the world of forms. Thus, according to Plato, we *recollect* the form of the perfect human being when we see any humans and we are thus able to identify the person as a human being because he *partakes* in the form of the perfect human being who is in the world of Forms (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012: 49–52).

The idea of *the form*, according to Plato, holds that everything has a perfect form which exists in the world of forms. Thus, everything on earth is a replica of that perfect form which is in the world of the forms (a world that is said to be totally different from this world but whose location we do not know and Plato could not explain). Although, there are many questions and arguments against this idea especially as raised by Aristotle, nonetheless, we seem to be left with no option other than to accept this as viable because this will make it possible to admit everyone that shares the human form into the fold of humanity whether sane or insane, properly formed or deformed, articulate or inarticulate. Moreover, as pointed out above, Aristotle himself eventually accepted the idea of the form

though with a different explanation from Plato as he posits that things exist with their form in this world and we *recognise* them when we see them. Consequently, he avers that there is no world of the form somewhere else as Plato posited (Stumpf & Fieser, 2012: 49–52 & 75–76).

Fundamentally, whichever of these explanations of the form that one subscribes to, what is important is that irrespectively of whether a person can use his reason or not, can articulate his speech or not, stand erect or not, we can know that such a person is a human being because of the *form*.

Therefore, if reason, articulate speech and upright movement are no longer exclusive to human being because robots can also do these things, it means that we have to redefine what a human being is and, in this case, we can start by saying that he is simply a homo sapiens who has a *form* that distinct him from other creatures as Plato and Aristotle posited above. In other words, our *form* is the only thing that defines us and not superior intelligence and articulate speech as we had previously believed. This is true because it has even been predicted that AI in robots, automated machines and computers may eventually outsmart us in terms of superior thinking and intelligence. Therefore, we can no longer claim that the domain of reason belongs exclusively to human beings and it is either we subscribe to the fact that we are simply homo sapiens and it is only our *form* that defines us or we accept back the traditional definition of man as pontifical – a link between heaven and earth – and, purely, a vicegerent of God on earth which is a quality that will set us apart from all other things and beings as Nasr posits. Nonetheless, if what remains of the definition of man as a promethean human being in the light of AI robot is the *form*, we can still argue that humans possess two more things that are still beyond the reach of AI robots and these are *imagination* and *creativity*. While thinking is linear in nature, the power of imagination is beyond prediction and thus beyond the thinking of a robot.

Even though an AI robot may be able to predict certain things about the behaviour of man based on his pattern of doing certain actions frequently, there is no denying the fact that human has the capacity to change abruptly based on his imagination which sometimes defies logic. In other words, humans have the ability to be irrational and behave irrationally which is something a robot lacks the ability to do. It is this power of irrationality that also speaks to man's ability to be creative. This is because creativity is essentially irrationality as it is something that defies the norms. A human being is one of the most unpredictable being on the surface of the earth and this is due to other factors than rationality (factors which to my mind are imagination and creativity). The power of human imagination which leads to creativity could make rationality useless and this may be an area in which humans will be able to surpass AI robots. If, therefore, imagination and creativity are things that are peculiar to man, it is pertinent that in this age of disruption, it is something which may better define a human being. In the light of this, we could conclude that in addition to the *form* of man, man also has imagination and creativity as part of his definition and thus, we could redefine a human being as "a man/woman with the *form* of homo sapiens who has the power of *imagination* and *creativity* and shares the ability to perceive, think and walk erect with AI robots." In other words, three important elements that differentiate man from AI robots are: *form*, *imagination* and *creativity*.



The downside to the above is also the fact that like Aristotle posited on reason, articulation and walking erect, humans have these two things potentially and not actually. It is possible that some may not be able to use their imagination and creativity whether they are aware of them possessing them or not. Thus, *form* seems to be the only thing that is actual and constant in man.

However, in spite of this new definition and understanding of humanity, on a sober note, it is important to point out that this journey that humanity is embarking on in revolution 4.0 could spell doom for human beings just as previous revolutions has resulted in man losing himself as a directionless being coupled with the attendant environmental disaster that is currently plaguing the world. Many scholars have warned that AI robots if not carefully handled could spell the doom of humans and some have even predicted that we are creating specie of being that will eventually replace us. Great as this tool (AI robot) is, we should not lose sight of the fact that there is the potential of some human going rogue with its use and we could even turn them on ourselves thereby causing self-implosion. In our quest to use this tool for our comfort, it is better if we accept and go back to our definition of human beings in the traditional society as pontifical being so that our use of this tool will be guided by the Will of Heaven and not the Will of promethean man.

As Louis Pojman pointed out in his ethics, something which is anchor on the power of a divine authority has a lot of meaning for man than something which is not anchor on any authority and could be used for anything as a person deems fit (see Pojman, 1999: 202–205). The warning of Seyyed Hossein Nasr which was relevant as at the time that man was just discovering the fossil fuel and redefining himself in the light of the rapid changes at that time is still very much relevant in the contemporary time where new changings are occurring on an alarming note because of the use of AI. Pontificalism as defined by Nasr is the way for us to go and it is the solution to the problems that we are facing now and will face in the future. Our redefinition as *form*, *imagination* and *creativity* as an edge against the rationalism of AI robot will not deliver us from the perils that we are going to put ourselves into except, in addition to these things, we subject ourselves to the Will of Heaven as in traditional societies while discarding therein<sup>1</sup> things that contradict what we know to be true based on objective knowledge. If the Will of Heaven guides human use of AI technology, the potential to use it in a destructive way will be minimal and in fact could be curbed through a joint action of the international community.

## Conclusion

In this brief analysis, this paper looked at the definition of human beings in the traditional society and how this definition changes and continue to change as humans move along in his history. It pointed out how Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees the definition of man in the traditional society as the real concept of man and explained how he warned against discarding this concept as man move on in his historical journey. According to him, man will continue to create problem for himself as long as he does not return to his origin of being a Pontifical being wherein his destiny and the fate of his society lies. With the advent of revolution 4.0 and the use of AI, the definition and understanding of man has again

changed from being the only rational being to being *form, imagination* and *creativity*. However, based on what Nasr explained, these in themselves will not be enough to solve the problem of man and take him out of the conundrums that he has put himself and other things on earth. To arrive at a comprehensive solution, man has to reconnect himself to heaven by going back to being the pontifical being that he was intended to be by his Creator.

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