Abstract:

This paper compares the educational thought of Paulo Freire and Confucius on what it means to be more fully human. Both Freire and Confucius object to the dehumanisation of human beings through the banking concept of education and other oppressive practices. They argue for the ontological vocation of becoming more fully human through humanisation and humanity (ren) respectively. In terms of differences, Freire’s notion of humanisation seeks to transform human beings from objects to subjects who know and act. Confucius’ concept of humanity, while also stressing autonomy and agency, places moral self-cultivation at its centre. While Freire advocates critical consciousness and social transformation, Confucius propagates dao- or Way-consciousness and self-transformation. The essay concludes by exploring a synthesised conception of humanisation where human beings are subjects who are motivated and guided by humanity (ren).

Keywords: Confucius; Freire; humanisation; humanity

Introduction

Much has been written on Paulo Freire’s educational thought, particularly his vision of humanisation, in the Western literature. But what is relatively less well known and expounded on are the writings of non-Western philosophers on what it means to be (more) human. Among the thinkers is Confucius whose ideas shape and define Chinese philosophy and traditions. Confucius has much to say about the nature, state and goal of humanity as well as the relationship between humanity and education. Given the limited extant literature on East-West philosophical perspectives on the subject of humanity, this essay aims to fill the gap by comparing the views of Freire and Confucius on the topic. The essay begins with an exposition of Freire’s notion of humanisation, followed by a discussion of Confucius’ ideal of humanity (ren). The next section highlights their similarities and differences as well as examines the fundamental reasons for their divergent positions. This essay concludes by proposing a synthesised conception of humanisation based on the ideas of Freire and Confucius.
**Freire’s Notion of Humanisation**

Freire introduces his concept of humanisation as an antithesis to dehumanisation. He describes dehumanisation as a distortion of human beings’ vocation of becoming more fully human (Freire, 1970). His fieldwork for his book was in Northern Brazil where workers were owned by landowners and experienced punishing work lives. Accordingly, the pedagogy he describes (and the process of humanisation) envisions building toward a revolution and the creation of new institutions. Dehumanisation is “not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanises the oppressed” (Freire, 1970, p. 44, italics in the original). A prominent tool of dehumanisation is the ‘banking concept of education’ that is marked by mechanical transference, machinelike memorisation and reduction of students to ‘containers’ to be deposited by the teacher (Freire, 1970, 1998, 2005). As “adaptable, manageable beings” (Freire, 1970, p. 73), students are treated as objects trapped in a perpetual state of dehumanisation. The workers and slaves during Freire’s time were converted into things by a work structure in which they are perpetually controlled by the landowners.

Freire aspires to liberate the oppressed from the death-affirming climate of oppression and the oppressor-oppressed contradiction. His desired outcome is the humanisation of all people that is their “ontological vocation” (Freire, 1970, p. 75). To be more fully human is to struggle against the objectification of human beings as ‘things’ to be known and acted upon. It is a march towards becoming a subject who knows and acts. An integration of knowing and acting is praxis that refers to “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 79). For Freire, humanisation requires conscientisation that entails “the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (Freire, 1970, p. 109). It is the awakening of critical consciousness that makes it possible for people to enter the historical process as subjects in search for self-affirmation. Conscientisation liberates a person to understand reality, history and one’s role in it differently and critically, thereby altering one’s perception of the facts (Freire, 1996, 1998, 1999). Through conscientisation, human beings become “agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the ‘why’ of things and facts” (Freire, 1999, p. 105).

The vocation of becoming more fully human necessarily repudiates the banking concept of education. A ‘problem-posing’ approach is proposed by Freire where students are no longer passive and manipulated learners. Instead, they are subjects who overcome authoritarianism, alienating intellectualism and a false perception of reality (Freire, 1970). Problem-posing education is carried out through dialogue where both the teacher and students are critical co-investigators (Freire, 1970). Participants in a Freirean dialogue co-create knowledge dialectically where teaching and learning become knowing and reknowing. As Freire puts it, the “learners gradually know what they did not yet know, and the educators reknow what they knew before” (2005, p. 160). Co-investigation begins with the teacher ‘re-presenting’ as a problem the reality that the learner currently perceives. The ‘problem’ stems from the existing situation that human beings are in, where they are likely to adopt a fatalistic outlook of their situation. The aim is for students to question their prior perception of reality and of themselves. The oppressed person seeking humanisation must expel the oppressors' dismissal of the oppressed as worthless by critically analysing and delegitimate the stories they have been told.

The programme content for the problem-posing approach is diametrically opposed to that for the banking model. The latter relies on materials unrelated to the students’ lived experiences and are totally selected by the teacher. An example of the banking concept of education given
by Freire is an educator who arranges for peasants to read academic texts in which one learns that “the water is in the well” (Freire, 1970, p. 119). In contrast, the content for the problem-posing approach is “constituted and organised by the students’ view of the world, where their own generative themes are found” (Freire, 1970, p. 109). Freire cites his own experience of posing a situation depicting work in the fields as a problem to the peasants. He observes that this approach results in the peasants, as transforming beings, calling for an increase in wages and creation of a union to achieve their wage demand. It should be added that although Freire’s problem-solving approach has been described as a ‘method’ or ‘methodology’ by some writers (e.g. see Wallerstein, 1987), it is not a “reductionistic method” that is applied mechanically (Macedo, 2008, ix). Rather, it is more accurate to regard it as an orientation that is underpinned by certain epistemological and ethical principles, and developed in relation to the particulars of a given context. As explained by Roberts (2010), Freire stressed that he did not have a ‘method,’ or even a set of methods, that could be transported without change from one educational situation to the next. Instead, Freire noted repeatedly, attention must be paid to the specificities of pedagogical contexts; the methods that will be appropriate in one context will differ from those that might be best in another (p. 6).

Confucius’ Notion of Humanity (Ren)

Like Freire, Confucius’ notion of humanity (ren) is conceptualised against a backdrop of dehumanisation during his time. Confucius witnessed political and social upheavals during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period in the sixth century B.C.E. Oppression of the masses was rampant as leaders of various states turned to immoral and exploited means to gain political power in the midst of a declining Zhou dynasty (Tan, 2013). Confucius spoke out against rulers for imposing harsh laws and punishment and for their lack of virtues (Analects 2.3, 12.13, 12.17, 17.5). For instance, he criticised political leaders as follows: “How could I bear to look upon a person who, in occupying high office, is not tolerant, who in observing rituals is not respectful, and who in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?” (Analects 3.26, also see 3.2, 3.10; all subsequent citations are taken from this text and translated into English by the author).

Desiring to overcome the social and political disorder as well as moral degeneration, Confucius calls for the cultivation of humanity (ren) by all human beings. Also translated as ‘humaneness’, ‘benevolence’, ‘goodness’, ‘perfect virtue’, and ‘authoritative conduct’, among others, the Chinese character for ren is etymologically related to ‘human being’. Confucius believes in empowering learners to reflect on and challenge current realities, identify problems and work towards a resolution by striving to become more fully human. Confucius believes that humanity is universal and indispensable for all human beings. This is evident in his pronouncement that “the common people need humanity more than water and fire” (15.35). He also commends those who are prepared to sacrifice their lives in order to achieve humanity (15.9). A multi-faceted concept that covers all virtues, humanity entails “loving others” (12.22). A ren or humane person does not oppress or dehumanise others since such a person is “free from evil” (4.4). Rejecting all forms of dehumanisation, a humane person loves others by “helping them to become their best, not their worst” (12.16). A person manifests one’s ontological vocation of becoming more fully human when such a person demonstrates virtues such as courage (14.4), reverence, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence, generosity (17.6), strength, decisiveness, simplicity and deliberateness in speech (13.27). Confucius’ ideal of humanity goes beyond outward behaviour to encompass “one’s entire
Confucius teaches that humanity is actualised through learning and realising Way (dao) that comprises the ‘normative tradition’ (Chan, 2000) inherited from one’s cultural predecessors. The Way is exemplified by the values and practices of the sage-kings in ancient China (8.18, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21) and encapsulated in the culture of the Zhou dynasty. Stating that he follows the Zhou culture (3.14), Confucius proclaims the virtue of the Zhou dynasty as the highest excellence of all (8.20, 17.5). It follows that students should learn the Zhou culture, including its social institutions, texts, the exemplary conduct of the sage-kings and other cultural resources. But an appreciation of Zhou culture should not take place in an oppressive or dehumanising learning environment. Alluding to the banking concept of education, Confucius rejects passive learning and rote-memorisation. He questions the usefulness of a learner reciting three hundred Songs without the corresponding ability to apply what one has learnt in life (13.5). He also expresses his refusal to teach anyone who does not put in one’s effort to understand, reflect and extend what one has learnt (7.8). Rather than treating students as objects to be indoctrinated and controlled, Confucius privileges learner-centric teaching approaches such as dialogue that develop the learner’s autonomy and foster self-cultivation towards humanity (Tan, 2015). The Analects is replete with accounts of Confucius engaging in discourses with people around him. For example, Analects 3.15 records Confucius “asking questions about everything” when he visited the Grand Ancestral Hall. Confucius also encourages his disciples to articulate their views, exchange ideas with him and even question his teachings. An example is his disappointment with his disciple Yanhui for his passivity and for not disliking anything he has taught (11.4). In contrast, he expresses his delight in another disciple Zigong for his inferential ability by telling him: “Only with someone like you can one discuss the Songs; you know what is to come based on what has been said” (1.15).

A Comparision between Freire and Confucius

The preceding shows that both Freire and Confucius object to the dehumanisation of human beings through the banking concept of education and other oppressive measures. At the same time, they share the conviction of equipping human beings to become more fully human through humanisation and humanity (ren) respectively. Freire’s ideal of humanisation and Confucius’ quality of humanity (ren) are both predicated on human beings as historical beings. Rather than seeing human beings as a-contextual, both position human beings as situated beings in specific socio-cultural settings and communities. Arguing that Freire’s humanisation is not an abstract process, Roberts (2008) points out that we humanise ourselves through our thoughts, emotions, choices, human relationships and conduct in everyday life. Likewise, Confucius’ concept of humanity is “grounded in the language, customs, and institutions that comprise culture” (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 67). Humanity is the ostensible characteristic of a person who “embraced its various aspects in living out life” (Lai, 1995, p. 254).

Related to the view of human beings as historical beings are the contextualised responses of Freire and Confucius to prevailing social and political problems. We can observe similar backgrounds that motivated them to challenge existing realities and champion social...
transformation. The sources of oppression which are the concrete manifestations of dehumanisation, for Freire, are found in repressive systems, institutions, regulations, norms, presuppositions and human relationships. In the Brazilian context, Freire had in mind “cultural elements that pervaded, dominated and divided groups of people in Brazil and other countries after World War II, elements he summed up in the term ‘oppression’” (Beckett, 2013, p. 54). His seminal book Pedagogy of the Oppressed was written during a period of a struggle for critical and socialist public education as well as radical transformation of society (Gadotti, 1996). Humanisation for Freire, accordingly, involves praxis that is targeted at changing the world and creating a new work structure in which the workers' voice is honoured. As for Confucius, he lived during the Spring and Autumn Period (c. 722 – 468 B.C.E.) that was marked by political and social turmoil coupled with moral decay. Political rulers of different states viciously competed for power and tyrannised the masses through harsh laws and punishment. Confucius’ attention on the attainment of humanity is his solution to the vexing problems and conflicts plaguing ancient China. The appeal by Freire and Confucius for humanisation and humanity respectively is therefore a direct response to real-life and pressing challenges confronting them. Both Confucius and Freire place their faith in human beings’ ability to alter their limit-situations and re-construct realities. Freire (1970) asserts the need to “trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason” (p. 66); dialogue necessitates “an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create” (p. 90). In the same vein, Confucius holds that everyone is capable of becoming an exemplary or noble person (junzi) who transforms the world (Tan, 2016a). Stressing that “human beings are similar in their nature, but differ as a result of their practice” (Analects 17.2), he affirms the possibility for everyone to achieve humanity through self-cultivation. It is noteworthy that the term junzi (literally ‘gentleman’) in ancient China was originally reserved for members of the aristocratic society. Confucius ingeniously borrows this term and teaches that everyone has the potential to become a junzi. In so doing, Confucius gives the term a new connotation that shifts its “sense and reference away from position, rank, birth, or function” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 61) towards the universal pursuit of humanity.

Freire and Confucius also converge on underlining the collective efforts to transform the world. Freire (1970)’s concept of ‘co-intentional education’ (p. 69) presupposes a community of teachers and students co-creating knowledge together through common reflection and action. He foregrounds not merely the individualistic but also the social character of the process of knowing (Freire & Macedo, 1995). He claims that the object of action for the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary is “the reality to be transformed by them together with other people” (Freire, 1970, p. 94). Observing that Freire rejects a ‘pure’, ‘atomistic’ notion of individual rational autonomy, Roberts (1996a) maintains that Freire supersedes the Cartesian notion of a self-identical, self-knowing ‘I’ with the dialogical, socially constituted ‘we’. Freirean dialogues are not simply conversations or group therapy sessions but a communal process of critical learning, knowing and political project to dismantle oppressive structures and mechanisms in society (Macedo, 2008). In like fashion, Confucius subscribes to the interdependence of human beings within a communitarian framework for humanity. It is instructive that the Chinese character for humanity (ren) connotes co-humanity as it is composed of the characters ‘two’ (er) and ‘human being’ (ren). Highlighting co-humanity, Confucius holds that “a ren person, in helping oneself to take a stand, helps others to take their stand; in desiring to reach a goal, helps others to reach the goal” (Analects 6.30, also see 8.8, 16.13, 20.3). To ‘take a stand’, in Confucian parlance, is to conduct oneself normatively by performing one’s social roles in accordance with Way
(dao). A collective effort is therefore needed to transform society through the self-cultivation and moral influence of junzi (exemplary or noble person).

The final parallel between Freire and Confucius concerns the question of obligation versus rights. Some scholars have argued that a crucial difference between Freire and Confucius in furthering social justice is that the former stresses the enjoyment and protection of human rights whereas the latter values individual obligations to society. For example, Zhao (2013) makes the following case:

Confucius promotes social justice and equity that was modeled on individual morality and virtuous people who could be examples to others and bring good to the world. He looked for a society of harmony and peace with a virtuous leader and self-cultivated people. Critical educators, however, envision democracy as a democratic form of government that allows for great diversity of interests and free interactions among social groups based on equality (p. 21).

While it is correct to identify the different emphases of Freire and Confucius that pertain to social justice, we should not overstate the difference between them. Freire, like Confucius, draws attention to the necessity of human obligations to society, particularly in his belief that the oppressed need to love the oppressors so as to “restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression” (Freire, 1970, p. 56). According to Freire, liberating the oppressors presupposes the orchestration of a revolution that creates an institutional context, specifically a socialist society, in which one would owe others. But since the oppressed do not owe the colonial system their allegiance, they have to free the oppressors because the latter have become callous and incapable of relating with others respectfully. That is why Freire refers to revolution as an act of love that the oppressed enact to free the oppressors. Likewise, Confucius, even as he highlights the need to fulfill one’s social obligations, underscores the fundamental right of every human being to be given the opportunity to learn and become a junzi (exemplary or noble person) (Tan, 2016b). Debunking discrimination, Confucius proclaims that he “teaches without making any distinction in category” (Analects, 15.39), i.e., teaches all students regardless of their family background, class, financial status and other contingent differences. Believing that everyone is entitled to receive an education, he states, “To anyone who, on his own accord, gives me as little as a gift of dried meat, I have never denied instruction to such a person” (7.7).

Notwithstanding the similarities between Freire and Confucius, there are at least two significant differences between them: their approaches to eliminate oppression and dehumanisation, and their ontological and epistemological worldviews that shape their conceptions of humanisation/humanity. First, Freire and Confucius hold contrasting positions on how to address the problem of dehumanisation. As mentioned, Freire favours problem-posing and not problem-solving. His goal is not for the educator to prescribe solution(s) to specific problems, nor does he believe that there is a definite solution to a problem. Rather, it is by posing problems that participants are liberated since this exercise motivates them to “perceive contradictions in ideological positions, institutional structures, and everyday practices is one element in the process of revolutionary change” (Roberts, 1996b, p. 298). Freire’s focus is praxis that empowers human beings to combine action and reflection in order to transform the world. Confucius would agree with Freire on the need to foreground instances of oppressive problem-situations that the learners witness and experience. Confucius also hopes to develop the learners’ reflective abilities and harmonise reflection with action through living a humane life. In this sense, Confucius, like Freire, is adopting a problem-posing approach to help the learners to “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (Freire, 1970, p. 84, italics in the
original). But Confucius’ recommendation for addressing the problem of dehumanisation departs from Freire’s in two main ways.

First, the aim of Confucius, in drawing the learners’ attention to existing political and social problems, is not for them to directly protest against the oppressors or oppressive mechanisms and practices. Recall that Freire’s (1970) goal is to generate the “revolutionary effort” to transform oppressive structures radically through praxis (p. 126). But Confucius prefers a more indirect way of carrying out social reform by becoming exemplary persons (junzi) who think and act morally (Shim 2007). Rather than prioritising the transforming of society, Confucius starts with the self-transformation through attaining humanity and inspiring others to do likewise. The focus on self-cultivation as a prerequisite to transform the world prompted Confucius to travel from state to state, seeking to persuade rulers to follow his teachings on humanity. His aspiration was to nurture humane leaders who govern virtuously and not resort to oppressive laws and punitive measures. Put otherwise, Confucius seeks to “raise up the straight above the crooked so that the crooked will be made straight” (Analects 12.22), i.e., develop ministers whose moral leadership (‘the straight’) will keep evil people at bay (‘the crooked’) and bring peace to the people (also see 14.42). Rather than directly instilling critical consciousness in the masses for them to challenge the authority, Confucius believes in a less confrontational approach through individual and collective self-cultivation in humanity.

Secondly, Confucius goes beyond Freire’s problem-posing to problem-solving. Confucius recommends a specific solution to the pervasive problem of social and political turmoil: a return to the dao or Way of heaven (Tan, 2013). Confucius attributes the disorder to the neglect of an observance of Way. As he puts it, “the world has long been without Way” (3.24) and “I would not need to change anything if Way is to be found in the world” (18.6). He stresses that everything must be done in accordance with Way (4.5), that we should set our heart-minds on Way (7.6) and hold fast to the good Way till death (8.13). To observe Way, as discussed earlier, is to treasure and subscribe to the culture of the Zhou dynasty. Rather than Freire’s critical consciousness, Confucius propagates Way-consciousness by adhering to and promoting Zhou culture. Another related difference between Freire and Confucius lies in the programme content for problem-solving. For Freire (1970), the content for his problem-solving approach is comprised of the problems confronting the learners and “things about which they want to know more” (p. 93). For Confucius, however, the content may include but should not be primarily constituted and organised by the students’ view of the world. Instead, it should be based on knowing and acting upon the knowledge, beliefs, values and practices of Zhou dynasty. While Freire does not reject problem-solving as a natural outcome of problem-posing, the former should not originate from the teacher or a prescribed tradition, but emerge instead from dialogues among teachers and students. As explained by Souto-Manning (2010), “[d]ialogue can lead to problem solving and is intended to break the monological definition of situations and conditions lived by culture circle participants, challenging the deterministric vein in their lives” (p. 40).

Besides their disparate approaches to eliminate oppression and dehumanisation, Freire and Confucius also differ in their epistemological and ontological worldviews that shape their conceptions of humanisation/humanity. Freire locates the primary source of knowledge in situated human beings within a neo-Marxist framework: knowledge is created by the oppressors who develop what Friere (1970) describes as ‘necrophilic’ way of thinking that reflects their need to protect their property in a colonial society. Underlining that fact that knowledge is co-created through praxis that transforms reality, Freire holds that people, as neither oppressors nor oppressed, can and should treat each other fairly in a socialist society. Knowledge should be the joint product of both the teacher and students and not “a gift
bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Freire further differentiates between ‘empirical knowledge’ and ‘revolutionary knowledge’, with the latter being knowledge of the causes of reality. He argues for the people’s empirical knowledge of reality to be transformed into revolutionary knowledge through dialogue with and inputs from the leaders’ critical knowledge.

Freire’s conclusion that the knowledge is created by all human beings – including the oppressed – accounts for his rejection of a paternalistic relationship between the teacher and students. Shaull observes that a peasant, under a Freirean model, “can facilitate this process for a neighbour more effectively than a ‘teacher’ brought in from outside” (cited in Freire, 1970, p. 32). But Freire’s belief in an equal relationship between the teacher and students does not mean that he views teachers as redundant. Instead, teachers should still direct the learners through initiating dialogue and guiding them. Asserting the value of authority and competence, Freire (1987) avers, “A teacher who does not take pedagogy seriously, who does not study, who teaches badly what she/he does not know well, who does not struggle to obtain the material conditions indispensable to education, that teacher is actively inhibiting the formation of intellectual discipline so essential to students” (p. 214). While Freire supports giving freedom to the learner, he cautions against turning freedom into licence. Instead, he urges teachers to “transmit a sense of limit that can be ethically integrated by freedom itself” (Freire, 1998, p. 96). Achieving a fine balance between freedom and authority enhances rather than imperils the learner’s capability to (re)create knowledge and (re)construct reality.

As for Confucius’ epistemological and ontological worldview, he does not deny that all human beings are capable of (re)producing knowledge and (re)imagining realities. But the knowledge he wishes to advance and believes to be the solution to widespread political and social chaos is the knowledge of the Way (dao). Confucius teaches that knowledge is bestowed by heaven, originates from dao (Way) and exemplified by sage-kings such as Kings Wen and Wu. Confucius praises sage-king Yao’s majestic success and brilliant cultural achievements as evidences of his normative behaviour, attitudes and values (Analects 8.19). As noted earlier, the Way is epitomised by the culture of the Zhou dynasty which is “both inspired and protected by Heaven” (Ivanhoe, 1990, p. 28). It is therefore imperative for human beings to return to the Golden Age, i.e., Zhou dynasty where “the basic features of civilised human life were thought to have been discovered and instantiated in a perfect social, political, and ethical order” (Wilson, 1995, p. 270).

It is important to clarify that tracing knowledge back to the Way does not entail that the Way is essentialised, perfect and unchanging. Nor does it imply that teachers should simply transmit the knowledge to students without regard for the latter’s freedom and agency. The Way comprises the process of generating an actual order in the world for human beings to “set boundaries for themselves and for other things as they move forward in the world” (Li, 2006, p. 594). Far from being a fixed order in the world, the Way requires continuous and creative appropriation and extension by human beings. Confucius states that “it is human beings who are able to broaden the Way, not the Way that broadens human beings” (Analects 15.29). To broaden is to attain, perpetuate and promote the Way to future generations through a strategic, judicious and and flexible utilisation of the knowledge, norms and resources of one’s culture. To know Way is not simply a cognitive process but “a process of articulating and determining the world” by “influenc[ing] the process of existence within the range of one’s viable possibilities” (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 55). It is only through conducting oneself in relation to others – whether they are one’s family member, neighbour, friend or ruler – that
A Dialogue between Freire and Confucius

In comparing the ideas of Freire and Confucius, we can imagine how both thinkers would reasonably respond to each other’s formulations of humanisation/humanity. To Freire’s vision of humanisation, Confucius would likely respond that the ideal of human beings as subjects should also include educating them to become ethical persons who think, feel and act virtuously. The actualisation of humanity as evident in virtues such as love, care, respect and fairness is essential for the total eradication of oppressor-oppressed contradictions. Without a community of junzi (exemplary or noble persons) who are characterised, motivated and guided by humanity, there is no guarantee, from a Confucian perspective, that oppression and dehumanisation may not occur again. To be sure, Freire (1970) acknowledges the saliency of loving and restoring the humanity of one’s oppressors. But Confucius would counter that the oppressed may not possess love and other virtues spontaneously and therefore need to consciously learn about and cultivate oneself in humanity. Confucius would also question the extent to which learners, under a Freirean liberatory approach to education, are able to (re)create knowledge and (re)construct realities without relying on a pre-existing albeit evolving normative tradition. Confucius would also favour the transmission of some content knowledge, particularly praiseworthy elements drawn from one’s culture that prepares learners to subsequently reflect and engage in praxis.

Freire, on the other hand, would probably respond to Confucius’ ideas of humanity and moral self-cultivation by giving more prominence to critical reflection and social activism. On the one hand, Freire would agree with Confucius on the primacy of virtues such as love, humility and faith. Elaborating on dialogue, Freire (1970) writes, “It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue—loving, humble, and full of faith—did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into ever closer partnership in the naming of the world” (p. 91). But the love Freire has in mind is distinctively “armed love” (Shim, 2007, p. 532) where an accent on protests against social injustices and practical steps to redress them. Confucius’ solution of effecting social transformation through ethical self-cultivation would strike Freire as too passive and insufficient for overcoming oppression. As for Confucius’ proposal to return and subscribe to the normative tradition of one’s community, it is important to note that Freire does not object to tradition qua tradition. What he opposes instead are traditional institutions, systems, worldviews, norms, logics and lifestyles that oppress and dehumanise human beings (Roberts, 2003; Beckett, 2013). With this in mind, Freire may say that within the hierarchies of Chinese society, there is a danger that humans with power may develop authoritarian mindsets, structures and practices. For Freire, it is also doubtful that a virtues-based education could overcome the oppressor-oppressed division because this division is part and parcel of the economic system of a capitalist society where the oppressor's profits come from abusing workers. To this end, Freire would probably adopt a more cautious approach than Confucius in furthering a normative tradition and historical past. Freire (1998) reasons as follows:

To the degree that the historical past is not ‘problematised’ so as to be critically understood, tomorrow becomes simply the perpetuation of today. Something that will be because it will be, inevitably. To that degree, there is no room for choice. There is only room for well-behaved submission to fate. Today. Tomorrow. Always (p. 102, italics in the original).
Rather than upholding a particular normative tradition, Freire propounds adopting a more critical understanding of a plurality of normative traditions and multiple ‘re-presentations’ of the tradition(s). He would also advocate integrating selected historical and cultural resources into the lived experiences of the learners for the purpose of conscientisation and ultimately humanisation.

Our comparative study of the educational thought of Freire and Confucius raises a possibility of an integrated conception of humanisation that synthesises the core ideas from both philosophers. The proposed formulation envisions human beings as ren (humane) subjects who are empowered to know and act. Such a conception rejects the banking concept of education and other techniques that reduce the learners to objects who are oppressed, alienated and dehumanised. Instead, learner-centric pedagogies, in particular dialogue, take centre stage where both the teacher ‘re-presents’ the learners’ perceived realities of themselves and the world as problems. Conscientisation is promoted as the learners critically reflect on the problems and propose various responses and strategies to overcome oppression and dehumanisation. As part of the reservoir of information, tools and resources for praxis, at least one normative tradition from within the learners’ culture should be introduced to the learners. The objective is two-fold: to provide the learners, especially children, with the cultural coherence and an initial framework for them to acquire a substantive set of practices, beliefs and values; and to prepare the learners to subsequently critique the normative tradition itself and develop their own views (Ackerman, 1980; Tan, 2017). Throughout the process, the learners self-cultivate by internalising and demonstrating humanity (ren) in their social interactions and transformative actions. The ultimate goal is the eradication of oppressor-oppressed contradiction by creating a community of junzi (exemplary or noble persons) who are becoming more fully human through the passage of time.

Conclusion

This article has argued that both Freire and Confucius object to the dehumanisation of human beings through the banking concept of education and other oppressive practices. Both support the vocation of becoming more fully human through humanisation and humanity (ren) respectively. But they differ in their specific formulations of humanisation/humanity as well as their epistemological and ontological positions that shape their formulations. Freire’s notion of humanisation seeks to transform human beings from objects to subjects who know and act. Confucius’ concept of humanity, while also stressing autonomy and agency, places moral self-cultivation at its centre. While Freire advocates critical consciousness and social transformation, Confucius propagates dao- or Way-consciousness and self-tranformation. Finally, Freire locates the primary source of knowledge in human beings whereas Confucius traces knowledge back to dao (Way) that is encapsulated in the culture of the Zhou dynasty. The essay concludes by proposing a synthesised conception of humanisation where human beings are subjects characterised, motivated and guided by humanity (ren).

Space constraint means that this article is unable to discuss all dimensions of humanisation and humanity as expounded by both Freire and Confucius. Certainly, more can be said about the nature, process, outcome and moral implications of oppression, liberation and becoming more fully human from both Freirean and Confucian perspectives. For example, further research could focus on the debates surrounding Freire’s ideas such as the criticisms that he has presented a binary opposition between ‘the oppressor’ and ‘the oppressed’ especially in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, that he has failed to deal adequately with differences within and
between oppressed groups, and that he has not sufficiently acknowledged the multiplicity of (often conflicting) types of oppression and liberation. As noted by Roberts (2016),

Freire’s references to ‘the oppressed’ and ‘the oppressors’ in Pedagogy of the Oppressed … it has been suggested, gloss over the multilayered, often conflicting forms of oppression experienced by people of different ethnicities, genders and classes. Freire is seen to pay insufficient attention to questions of difference and to the specificities of particular forms of oppression (pp. 58-59; for a response to these claims, see Roberts, 2016).

As for Confucius, controversies to be addressed include the charges that he champions a social system where a person’s identity is circumscribed by his or her assigned social roles and the common people must obey their ruler, that he undermines or neglects the development of democracy, and that he denigrates women (for a response to these claims concerning Confucius, see Tan, 2013). Another line of inquiry for comparative study concerns the political aspects and implications of the epistemologies of Freire and Confucius. A pertinent question is whether Confucius’ view on knowledge and the Way as an embodiment of cultural continuity offers an intriguing and possibly more viable explanation than Freire's neomarxist stand. The Marxists maintain an epistemological position that suggests that capitalist society is underpinned by an ideology that justifies the domination of workers and such an ideology would be replaced by a new episteme in a socialist society. This conception of a radical break which is not stated but assumed in Freire's position, however, is debatable. Critics of Freire could argue there was a cultural continuity before and after the revolutions in both Russia and China – that socialism did not usher in a new socialist human or whole new epistemological standards. It is therefore interesting to examine and interrogate the respective epistemological worldviews of Freire and Confucius in relation to contemporary political and moral developments. By comparing the educational philosophies of Freire and Confucius and proposing an integrated conception of humanisation, this essay hopes to generate debates and contribute to the on-going dialogue between East and West.

Acknowledgements: The author is grateful to the reviewers for their helpful comments to an earlier draft.

References


