



Book review: Ted Chu's *Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential: A Cosmic Vision of Our Future Evolution*

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Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential may be the most important book in favor of transhumanism since Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near* (2005). It is well-organized, well-written, and insightful, remarkable in its scope, and the work of an author with outstanding credentials in finance and economics (former chief economist at General Motors, and former head of investments for Abu Dhabi). Ted Chu is clearly familiar with the movement and power of capital. If Kurzweil's book, that of an extraordinarily accomplished inventor, caught the attention of people in Silicon Valley, Chu's may have a similar effect in the industrial and financial worlds.

Chu urges us to create "Cosmic Beings" (CoBe), techno-posthumans who will vastly surpass us in their intelligence and in many other ways. Achieving this vision will require the efforts of an increasingly unified humankind, and Chu seeks to facilitate high-level transhumanist conversations on a global level, especially among and between Chinese and Americans, since they belong to the two countries that may hold the key to CoBe. With his high-level background in the worlds of finance and industry, and because he was raised in China and did his graduate work in the United States, Chu appears well situated to reach influential people in both countries.

He sees humankind as a crucial but transitional moment in a long-term evolutionary process that will leave Earth far behind. Three overarching themes structure Chu's exploration of these ideas: evolution, religion, and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. In fact, given the extent to which he appropriates and transforms Nietzsche's thought in the light of evolutionary thinking and technological possibilities, Chu could have subtitled his book *Nietzsche 2.0*.

Calling on the evolutionary paradigm that now informs virtually all fields of investigation, Chu maintains that, although humankind is an end in itself, it is also a means to a still higher evolutionary end. We are a transitional species that can and ought to take part in the *conscious* evolution needed to bring forth CoBe. The customary idea that humankind represents the peak of terrestrial evolution is contradicted by the on-going processes of cosmic evolutionary activity. In

other words, there is more – and better – to come. Maintaining the *status quo* is not a viable option, according to Chu, because humankind is at existential risk. A meteor that struck our planet could terminate the self-conscious life that has evolved here. If life, especially self-conscious life, is rare in the universe, such an event would be a cosmic tragedy. Like Hans Moravec and Kurzweil before him, Chu claims that human cooperation in the generation of techno-posthumans may eventually lead to a transformation of the entire cosmos. The stakes – human extinction, on the one hand, and creation of CoBe, on the other – could not be higher as we contemplate the goals posited by transhumanism.

Chu's second major theme concerns the importance of the world's great spiritual traditions for CoBe. Many of those traditions arose during what Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age, which occurred between 800 and 200 BC. Two influential traditions, Taoism and Biblical monotheism – especially Christianity – not only resonate with one another (despite obvious differences), but also may be read as supporting the dangerous venture of surpassing ourselves by creating CoBe. Whereas the Biblical tradition regards God as the eternal, unchanging Creator, Chu interprets God as a transcendent creative principle at work in cosmic evolution. On this approach, we are made in God's image, but this requires and empowers us to honor God by being creators in our own way. One of our opportunities is to create enormously intelligent beings that are not burdened by the constraints imposed by our genetic heritage.

By drawing on ancient spiritual traditions, both Eastern and Western, Chu reaches out to an audience wider than libertarian transhumanists, many of whom are atheists. At the same time, his thesis that the quest for transcendence is central to Christianity and the West allows him to challenge secular humanists who seem satisfied with humankind as it has evolved until now. Chu suggests that the yearning to transcend should always be tempered by the traditional Chinese recognition of human limitations and resistance to change.

Chu deploys a rhetorical strategy designed to “move” readers from many different backgrounds – religious and atheist, liberal and libertarian – to see that their own values can be reconciled with those associated with creating CoBe. He draws from notable politicians and political theorists from left and right – citing Mao Zedong as well as Ronald Reagan – to suggest that CoBe may provide a rallying point that transcends existing political ideologies. Chu makes clear his own strong commitment to CoBe even while acknowledging that achieving it will be neither easy nor painless. In a lengthy section in which he replies to objections and concerns about transhumanism and CoBe, he reveals both the transhumanist opportunity and its possible costs, which could be very significant. Such a massive historical shift might provoke even more wrenching socio-cultural changes than those that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. As economists are wont to point out, however, “creative destruction” characterizes any significant innovation.

In addition, Chu makes three crucial points. First, there are no guarantees that humankind can create CoBe, even if doing so becomes a significant human goal. Second, promoters of transhumanism may be wrong in interpreting transhumanism/CoBe as consistent with and contributing to cosmic evolution. Third, because of such considerations, we ought not to speak of CoBe as a pre-ordained cosmic destiny, because such discourse justified terrible deeds by twentieth-century totalitarian movements.

The third major theme of *Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential* involves using the conceptual framework of evolution to reinvigorate Nietzsche's thinking in ways that make it applicable to the possibility held out by transhumanism. The central question of the book is: *Why are we here?* That is, what is the goal of human life? Chu takes very seriously the implications of what Nietzsche calls the death of God. Much as Nietzsche posited the Overman as a goal for a

dispirited European humanity, Chu urges his readers to embrace the transcendent aim of CoBe in order to restore profound meaning to human existence. According to Nietzsche, goals are the perspectives needed to organize life. It is thus no accident that the longest chapter in Chu's book is devoted to the topic of perspectives, including why and how to posit the perspective required to justify the effort and risk involved in creating CoBe.

Strikingly from an author grounded in economics, Chu views human well-being, including economic prosperity, as primarily a *means* rather than an end. To be sure, he does not oppose material, social, and political development, which is good in itself and contributes to the technical-scientific developments necessary for producing CoBe. The same individual freedom, initiative, and creativity that generate wealth and opportunity for billions of people are also crucial if humankind is to surpass itself. Nevertheless, Chu regards the contemporary emphasis on utility maximization as indicating that humankind is settling for the mediocre goals that Nietzsche's Zarathustra ascribed to "the last man." Satisfied with the acquisition of material comforts, the last man lacks the capacity to shoot the arrow of his longing beyond himself.

Close students of Nietzsche's thought would argue that Chu overemphasizes the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Zarathustra says that humankind is something that must be overcome, and that humankind walks a tightrope over an abyss between the ape and the Overhuman. Later in the same work, Zarathustra changes his account of the Overhuman. By speaking of CoBe much more often than of the Overhuman, however, Chu indicates that he looks to the Overhuman as an inspiration, rather than as a literal goal. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche could not foresee the *new cosmic narrative* that was made possible by evolutionary theory, nor could he anticipate the extraordinary scientific-technological breakthroughs that put humankind on the brink of generating CoBe.

Whereas Nietzsche assumed that the Overhuman would transfigure the human body, Chu's Nietzsche 2.0 maintains that CoBe will not be limited by the organic body, which – despite its extraordinary qualities – is both fragile and responsible for the craving and aggression that create so much suffering. Nietzsche has Zarathustra say that humanity must remain "faithful to the Earth," and thus by extension to the organic body. By contrast, Chu insists that humankind must remain faithful not to the transient human body but rather to *cosmic creativity*, in the face of which humankind is but a temporary phenomenon, a stage along the way to something higher.

Some readers will object that there is scant possibility of creating artificial intelligence, so the whole notion of CoBe is implausible. No one is yet in a position to say whether this objection will pan out, but we should have a much better idea within about 25 years. Other readers will resist adopting the goal of creating CoBe without receiving the informed consent of billions of people whose lives may be dramatically changed – perhaps for the worse, at least for a time – by efforts to realize such an audacious project. Many postwar science fiction writers and film directors – artistic visionaries – depict future dystopias spawned by efforts to create artificial intelligence. Hence, some readers will maintain that we should adopt the "precautionary principle" regarding CoBe, that is, disallowing it to go forward until concerns about possible negative outcomes have been successfully addressed. Chu, however, points out that had this principle been in place during the past 150 years, many of the most important and beneficial technological advances would never have come to pass.

Chu calls upon his readers to summon the courage needed to do something truly extraordinary, even though significant risks would be involved in the process. Recognizing that a significant majority of people will not adopt transhumanism, Chu in effect appeals to those elites – scientific, technological, industrial, financial, intellectual – who may be willing to commit themselves to

CoBe. Perhaps such elites in particular are acutely aware of the lack of a higher, transcendent goal.

Chu has made an outstanding contribution to the growing conversation about the possibility and advisability of making CoBe a major human goal in the twenty-first century. Even those who are critical of such a goal will need to read and contend with his visionary work.