Should Robots Have Rights?

Man is not machine, and machine is not human. In what follows, I will discuss the works of philosophers including Ryder, Foot, Bentham and Singer to explore this, by firstly considering 'what confers Human Rights?', in order to consequentially argue that it is logical to conclude that robots should not have rights.

Before we begin to explore this question, we must understand exactly what we mean by 'robot'. The term itself is often misconceived, due to the duality between the literal definition in accordance with current research, and the representation and ideas presented to a large percentage of the population by the film and media industries. Robotics is a fairly modern and rapidly expanding discipline within Engineering, and since the invention of the first so called 'robot', in 1954 by American Engineer George Devol, major technological advances have been made over the last 67 years, which is what leads society to question the ethics that coincide with this branch of research and whether robots should have rights. A robot is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as a 'machine controlled by a computer that is used to perform jobs automatically'. Therefore, from this we are able to divide the field of robotics into two distinct areas, 'simple robotics' (that is, without the involvement of Artificial Intelligence (AI)), and 'AI robotics'.

After establishing an exact definition for the subject of this essay, we may begin by first examining the concept of Natural Rights. According to John Locke (1988), 'humans are born with 'inalienable' rights of life, liberty and property', which can be used as an argument to support greater rights of humans in comparison to animals and specific to this context, robots. However, this is opposed by the idea of Speciesism, which is 'the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to one or more particular species for reasons that do not have to do with the individual capacities they have' (Richard Ryder, 1991), suggesting that it is not morally right or fair for humans to have more rights than animals without justification specific to differences in physical attributes or characteristics.

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Ryder also stated that 'humans are only animals, just more intelligent'. Assuming cognitive intelligence to be one of the aforementioned differences which provides a suitable justification for the rights of humans above other species, we are able to assess this ability within robotics and draw an appropriate conclusion. The 'Turing Test¹' (Alan Turing, 1950), is a way of determining a computer's intelligence, and consists of an interrogator in a separate room from a robot² and a person (given labels X and Y). The interrogator must determine through questioning alone which the robot is, the aim of the robot being to ensure the interrogator arises at an incorrect judgement. If this occurs, a robot is considered intelligent. This test was passed for the first and only time in 2014 by a robot by Russian developer, Vladimir Veselov, therefore, if we consider intelligence to be the main factor in whether or not a robot should be granted rights, from Turing's hypothesis it follows that robots should be given rights. However, the 'Chinese Room Experiment' (John Searle, 1980) argues that the Turing test does not adequately demonstrate the intelligence of a robot. Searle describes a non-Chinese speaker (A) in a room, where notes written in Chinese by a Chinese speaker (B) are slipped under the door. (A) is able to use detailed instructions within the room to reply to these notes, the result being that (B) assumes that they are in a conversation with another Chinese speaker. These instructions act as a metaphor for the coding or information presented to a robot. This experiment demonstrates that intelligence or understanding is not strictly required to appear intelligent, and therefore creates a clear distinction between the two, suggesting that robots may merely appear intelligent, and without the programming and data from humans, they would not be able to perform the same tasks. Drawing from our initial assumption, it is logical to conclude that the greater intelligence of humans can be considered as a justification of the denial of human rights to robots.

¹ also known as the Imitation Game

² the presence of Artificial Intelligence within a robot defines whether a robot obtains the ability to make independent decisions without the aid of a computer, therefore here and henceforth in this essay 'robot' shall refer purely to AI robots

Furthermore, there are other factors that make up human intelligence that current robots lack, including human emotions, ethics, the 'Theory of Mind' (Blackmore, 2004) and consciousness. Consequently, this causes us to question whether robots have the capacity for moral reasoning as well as logical reasoning and therefore, could granting robots rights be harmful to society? The importance of this can be practically demonstrated through the recent design decision by car manufacturer, Mercedes Benz. The company manager of driverless car safety, Christoph von Hugo, explained that in the event of an unavoidable accident, the AI would be programmed to protect the vehicle and passengers at all costs, even if this results in the death of one or more pedestrian(s). This proves that considering the morality of robots is majorly important in questioning their rights within society due to the moral dilemmas that they will cause, in this case a 'real life Trolley Problem' (Philippa Foot, 1967). The trolley problem involves a trolley racing down a track towards five people, but there is a switch which would allow the trolley to be diverted onto a track in which only one person would be killed. Despite lacking in the aforementioned factors of human intelligence, a robot would be able to apply consequential³ (Jeremy Bentham, 1789 and John Stuart Mill, 1861) based moral reasoning to assess the optimal outcome⁴, as predictive analytics, including modelling, is one of the main uses of robots today. Flicking the switch to kill one person rather than five was also the most common decision amongst people⁵. An alternate variation of this problem involves the same straight track with five people and a bridge just before with a fat man, who if pushed off could, due to his build, stop the trolley (Judith Jarvis Thompson, 1989). In this case, it has been found that most humans would not sacrifice the man, acting accordingly to deontology (Kant, 1788) however without emotions, a robot would continue to act according to utilitarianism. The question then arises which is a more moral approach within society? Considering the concept of 'The Categorical Imperative' (Kant), deontology can be viewed as a limitation within humanity which robots are not bound by,

³ utilitarian

⁴ that is, the outcome with the least death

⁵ according to a 2017 study of over 70,000 participants in 42 countries, Iyad Rahwan and his team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

and consequently from a utilitarian point of view, robots could be argued to be more moral than humans. However, in relation to rights, utilitarian views can justify morally wrong actions, including breaching human (or robot) rights, (for example killing the man on the bridge) for overall general happiness and wellbeing within a population of humans (and robots). Therefore, robots should only be given rights if both human and robot lives can be considered equal.

Robots greatly differ from human beings due to the fact that they are man-made rather than naturally occurring beings. However, in recent studies, robots can be found to mimic biology, which has been argued in support of robot rights. According to a paper written by Janelle Shane, a robot programmed to walk a large distance quickly instead built itself into a large tower and fell forwards, hence covering the large distance following the most efficient solution. This behaviour can be seen in nature, where wheat stalks flop forwards to disperse their seeds the furthest distance. It would be fundamentally flawed however, to consider that robotics are evolving the same way as in nature, as organisms evolve through a 'trial and error' or 'survival of the fittest' (Darwin, 1859) method, whereas robots use provided data to find the optimal solution, therefore this evidence cannot be used to reject the idea that robots are non-living. Regardless of whether robots could be considered living or not, Singer (1979) states that, 'if a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account⁶.' A team of Japanese researchers⁷ have recently developed a robot which can 'feel' pain, by using sensors to act as receptors mimicking the human nervous system, and using programming to create facial expressions. However, this can also fall under the previously mentioned ideas by Searle, that robots are simply mimicking humans actions as opposed to existing as a similarly intelligent living being, therefore, as robots cannot physically feel pain, based on Singer's logic, robots do not require rights. Additionally, the lack of ability to feel pain supports the idea that human and robot lives cannot be

⁶ in regards to whether they should be granted rights

⁷ Osaka College, 2020

considered equal, consequently following the conclusion from the previous paragraph, robots should not be given rights.

In summary, the factors examined; cognitive intelligence; emotional intelligence, or ethics; and life, including the ability to feel pain; can be used to justify the greater rights of humans above other species. However, exploring these factors in relation to robots demonstrated a lack of evidence to lead us to conclude that the rights of robots may be justified in a similar way. Moreover, Singer provides a direct argument against these rights, thus it would be plausible to suggest that robots should not have rights.

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