Should robots have rights? Why or why not?

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Based on the 2017 parliament vote to give robots rights and obligations, it is time to confront the current and future advancements of artificial intelligence. In simple terms a right is a set of rules one is entitled to that shouldn't be taken away, based on what one is allowed to do or have. These may be enshrined in the law. The United Nations announced the universal declaration of Human rights on the 10th December 1948. This was a response to the abuses of power in World War Two by authoritarian regimes which overlooked the shared human biology of all sentient beings. A sentient being is something that can perceive and feel, and as humans we are morally obliged to grant rights to other sentient beings. Therefore, animal rights were created, to a lesser degree. This is established on the general belief that the differences between humans and animals are: complex reasoning, complex language, and introspection. Therefore, the underlying question within this title is whether a robot can ever truly be a sentient being.

By dictionary definition, a robot is a machine that resembles a human, completes mechanical tasks on command, or any mechanical device that operates automatically. Throughout history we have demonstrated a desire to imitate nature, starting with cave paintings to biomimetics and now robots. We seem to show emotion towards robots as they appear to have intentional movements, which humans have endowed upon them whilst imitating nature. Intentional movements are something we are biologically programmed to recognise as it was used by our ancestors to survive. For example, you can recognise if a tiger is about to attack by the movements before they pounce. A study by Heider and Simmel (1944) reveals how we apply intentional movements to objects which have no intention. In the procedure, participants were shown a video of moving geometrical shapes and then asked to describe what they saw. The majority described the shapes having intention, goals and aims as if they were conscious. This explains why humans sympathise with robots even though they have no genuine emotions. This concept can be applied to virtual assistants on devices. In some sense, virtual assistants are robots but without a human-like form. When one switches their device off, they don't feel guilt, because they know virtual assistants don't possess emotion. However, if they, had a human-like form which portrayed intentional movements, we may react differently when they are switched off. The illusion of a robot's intentional movements causes our one-way emotion and draws us to the conclusion that they must have rights. This obstructs all rationality, as a robot is more similar to a toaster than to a living being.

However, it would be foolish to only apply this question to modern day with the knowledge of the rapid development of artificial intelligence. We can predict that at some point in the future, robots will become sentient beings. This prediction has been stated by Richard Dawkins who sees "no reason why in the future we shouldn't reach the point where a human-made robot is capable of consciousness and of feeling pain". Moore's Law is the formula developed by Gordon E. Moore which estimates that the speed and capability of computers are expected to double every two years. This supports the predicted future of AI stated by Dr Susan Schneider that "In 30-80 years we may develop (…) sentient beings". With the understanding of this prediction, it is only fair to grant robots their own set of rights when they meet the definition of a sentient being.

However, the philosopher, John Searle, believes it is impossible for robots to ever become sentient beings. His Chinese room argument states that robots will only ever be able to simulate biological processes and that they are unable to think independently. This argument responds to the Turing test, also known as AI's 'empirical goal', where if a robot passes, it is understood that it can think independently. Searle's argument states that a digital computer may appear to understand a language but can't produce understanding. Searle describes a man in a room responding to Chinese perfectly because he is following a computer program. This leads the people outside to believe that he speaks Chinese. The program he follows creates this illusion, as he has no true understanding. His conclusion is that if a language is installed into a robot, they don't truly understand it, as it is only following a set of instructions.

Critics respond to this argument by saying the claim that the man inside the room does not understand Chinese to the conclusion that no understanding has been created is false. For, if a robot was given the information to recall Chinese, that does not limit that robot of understanding. Psychologically, understanding is responding to concepts adequately. A robot would do this by translating the Chinese into its own code in order to reply correctly. When learning a second language a human does the same thing by translating the foreign language into their first language. It is then understood that a robot understanding and communicating a language demonstrates a type of independent thinking, a steppingstone for AI to produce sentient beings.

From a different perspective, Christianity may argue that giving robot's rights would belittle the word of God as Genesis 1:27 states, "God created man in his own image", meaning humans reflect, moral, spiritual and intellectual characteristics of God. Robots aren't natural so are not made in the eyes of God, so they don't portray these qualities. Additionally, robots don't have any moral value since these are the ethics given to humans from God. How would technology provide robots with compassion similar to human nature that was created by God? Technology cannot replicate God's work. Assuming that humans can copy God's work by creating a line of sentient beings is reductionist towards God's creation. This also questions whether a robot can ever be as morally advanced as humans if they can never become a moral agent. Therefore, from a Christian perspective it would problematic to grant robots rights as it devalues the word and creation of God.

In contrast, if humans are created in the image of God, and robots are created in the image of humans, they could also be created in the image of God. When technology can create a robot, with a moral and intellectual awareness that promotes *imago dei*, then under the eyes of Christianity a robot would be entitled to a set of rights. Once this is apparent, it must mean that robots are sentient which indicates they can feel pleasure and pain. Jeremy Bentham would suggest that this is the basis for moral awareness. This hedonistic view describes how actions are right if they promote pleasure and wrong if they promote pain, and therefore how a robot could be a moral agent. Even though this concept doesn't directly follow Christian understanding, under the universal law of agape, the most loving thing to do would be to show compassion towards another which is capable of pleasure and pain. Thus, a robot might never have the same spiritual awareness as humans, but whilst it is sentient, one must act with agape towards it.

In conclusion, the answer to the question 'should robots have rights?', depends on the current advancements. In 2021, robots are not entitled to their own rights because they are not sentient beings, they are merely programmed to appear so. This illusion has currently caused people to argue for robot rights because of the confusion surrounding their 'intentional movements'. Robots replicate these movements because they are encoded to do so. This triggers our instinctual reactions and wrongly causes us to feel sympathy towards them. However, as acknowledged by Richard Dawkins and enforced by Moore's Law, it is likely that robots will reach a point of sentience in the future. John Searle argues that this can never happen because he believes his Chinese room argument proves that robots will never be able to think for themselves. However, this has been disproven by critics who argue that encoding information into robots gives them a level of understanding, necessary for them to be able to think independently. From a different perspective, the proposal that once sentient, robots must have rights, undermines the word of God. Robots aren't created in Gods image and so it would not be necessary for them to be treated on the same level as God's creations. On the other hand, you could argue that through agape, granting a sentient robot rights would be the most loving thing to do. Overall, in terms of human morality which aligns with Christian ethics, once a robot meets the definition of a sentient being, it is necessary for them to have their own set of rights.

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