

AI Robots & Ethics 2015/16

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Week 9

Objective

This is the final week of the online component of our course. In previous weeks, we have investigated whether and to what extent machines can or should be accorded some level of moral consideration as either a moral agent or moral patient. This week we want to consider some possible responses to the critical problems that have been identified in previous weeks. We will, therefore, attempt to think *otherwise*. The term “otherwise” is designed to have a double meaning in this particular context. On the one hand, it indicates way of thinking about the moral relationship outside and beyond the categories of “agent” and “patient.” Although parsing the “machine question” into these two component parts has proven to be a useful way to organize the inquiry, the terms “agent” and “patient” already limit what can be asked about and investigated. Like the frame of a camera, these two terms allow certain items to be seen and investigated, but they also and inevitably leave something lying outside the edge of the frame that remains unseen. For this reason, “thinking otherwise” indicate a way of thinking about the moral relationship that challenge the agent/patient dialectic. It is, to use colloquial terminology, a way of “thinking outside the box” of standard forms of moral theorizing. On the other hand, “thinking otherwise” also indicates a mode of moral consideration that can respond to and accommodate “others,” especially those others who have been and remain outside moral philosophy’s own efforts to deal with the Other. As we have seen from our previous work, moral philosophy is exclusive. It always and inevitably distinguishes between *who* counts as a moral subject (who is considered a legitimate agent and/or patient) and *what* remains a mere object that can be used and abused as we see fit. And different moral theories, as we have seen, draw the line differently. The question that remains, therefore, is whether it is possible to devise a mode of moral thinking that can theorize and justify its own necessary and seemingly unavoidable exclusions? The question, therefore, is not simply whether the machine can be or should be a moral subject but what happens to our sense of moral philosophy in the face of this machinic other?

Readings

D. Gunkel, Machine Question (159-216)

Questions

- 1) At the end of our nine weeks of reading and thinking about the moral status of the machine, how would you answer the “machine question?” Can a machine, or a specific class of machine, be considered a moral agent? Can it be considered a moral patient? Why or why not?
- 2) Can or should a moral theory contain everything? Is it possible or even desirable to have a moral philosophy that can accommodate all things? Or is it necessary that ethics be decisive—that it divide between *who* counts as a moral subject from *what* does not? And if so, how can we know whether this line of division is drawn in the right place? How can we be certain that we have not excluded others who should have been included? How can or should moral philosophy deal with and justify its own exclusions?