

Taking Robots Personally: A Personalist Critique

Mark Y. A. Davies

Oklahoma City University
Wimberly School of Religion
2501 N. Blackwelder
Oklahoma City, OK 73106
mdavies@okcu.edu

Abstract

This paper analyzes the ethical and axiological implications of the interaction between human persons and robots. Special attention is paid to issues of the depersonalization of society and the devaluing of our natural environment and to the issue of taking robots personally, i.e., relating to them and treating them as if they are persons. The philosophical frameworks of personalism and process philosophy are used as a lens through which to make this analysis.

Depersonalization in Society as a Disvalue

This paper begins with the personalist assumption that the depersonalization of human society is a disvalue; i.e., it is not a good thing when positive relations among human persons are decreased within human communities. By positive relations among human persons, I mean relations that enhance the overall value and quality of life of human persons. Insofar as technology is used in such a way that it contributes to positive personal relationships within human community and positive human relationships with the rest of nature, it is a value; insofar as technology is used in ways that it contributes to an erosion of personal relationships within human community and/or to unsustainable human relationships with the rest of nature, it is a disvalue. Similarly, if relations between human persons and robots foster positive personal relationships within human community and positive human relationships with the rest of nature, these relations are a value; if these human/robot relations damage personal relationships within human community and/or contribute to unsustainable human relationships with the rest of nature, these relations are a disvalue.

Some Axiological Considerations

The axiological assumption that rests behind the statements above is what I refer to as the ecological axiom. The ecological axiom is stated as follows:

All persons ought to act so as to maximize value in general, which would include the value of all life over the long run.

This formulation recognizes both the value of human persons and the value of non-human life. It also incorporates the insight of process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr. who suggests considering the following alternatives as possible ethical principles from which to inform our decision making and guide our actions:

1. So act as to maximize value for yourself in the present.
2. So act as to maximize value for yourself for the rest of your life.
3. So act as to maximize value for all human beings for the indefinite future.
4. So act as to maximize value in general. (Cobb, 137-153)

The first principle may describe our behavior most of the time, but it does not consider the future or respect the intrinsic value of others, and therefore it does not pass for an adequate ethical principle in light of our contemporary ecological challenges (137-153). The second principle is more prudent for the individual, but it ignores the consequences of our actions on other persons and the rest of life, insofar as these consequences do not directly decrease our own experience of value (137-153). The third principle is more inclusive in that it includes the value of all human beings, but it ignores the intrinsic value of the rest of life (143-144). Only the fourth alternative of maximizing value in general is appropriate for an adequate ecological ethic that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life. If the idea that value is connected to experience were accepted, this fourth alternative would entail maximizing the enjoyment of experience in general.

The value theory that underlies this perspective proposes that values are of, for, and in sentient experiencers. Where

there is experience, there is value. All experience, no matter how rudimentary, has inherent worth, value for its own sake, regardless of its value to human experience. This position does not devalue the worth of human beings, but it does set this worth in the context of a community of experiencers that also has worth of its own. The value of human life is not juxtaposed against a valueless natural world; rather it is grounded in a world of value.

John B. Cobb, Jr. and Charles Birch, in their book, *The Liberation of Life: from the Cell to the Community*, maintain, "One should promote the richness of experience wherever possible" (Cobb & Birch, 164). This includes maximizing the quality of human life, but not while ignoring the impact on the rest of life (173). Cobb and Birch claim, "Wherever possible human beings should try to find ways to meet their own need which at the same time support other forms of animal life" (174). In the long run these two pursuits actually support one another.

The ecological axiom does not provide absolute moral principles to guide our decision-making and actions. This axiom must be applied contextually. Making decisions and acting morally from such a guiding principle requires complex analysis of the changing ecological situation and the interrelationships of the varying parts of the biosphere. The ecological axiom provides a general direction for action in our attempts to live in a sustainable relationship with the rest of nature.

The Value of Robots

To understand how robots figure into the goal of maximizing value in general for all life over the long run, one must decide what kind of value robots possess. This paper assumes that robots possess only instrumental value and not intrinsic value. Robots are neither moral agents nor moral patients, i.e., they are not capable of moral actions, nor do they require our moral respect for their own sake in and of themselves apart from their instrumental value. Therefore, robots help maximize value in general when they are "used" in such ways that contribute to the overall increase in value of life, both human and non-human. If however technology were to develop to the extent that robots could develop varying levels of sentience, then the assumption about their value status would need to be revisited. If sentient robots were developed, they would become at least moral patients, and if they were able to experience rationality and freedom they might become moral agents as well. At this point, there is no compelling evidence that robots have any of these experiences, so their value is viewed as being instrumental only.

In looking at the instrumental value of robots, it becomes evident that they make positive contributions to our quality of life and they possess great potential for contributing to

the value of life in general in the future. Robots perform many functions that enable human beings to focus on more important aspects of human community. Granted, there is a risk that our reliance on robots might create some difficult transitions in the workplace for persons whose functions are replaced by robots of various kinds, but there are adjustments that come with the introduction of all new forms of technology. Another potential negative consequence of our reliance on robots is that as we become more reliant on robots, it might decrease the amount of time that we spend in interpersonal relationships with other human beings and in meaningful interaction with the rest with nature. Some would argue that we already experience this as persons spend more time engaged with computer technology than with other human persons or with the rest of the natural world.

The Problem of Taking Robots Personally

As robot technology progresses and as robots are made to look and act more and more in human-like ways, there is an increasing tendency for human persons to interact with robots as if they are persons. This is a point noticed with a significant level of concern by one of my colleagues at Oklahoma City University, Ted Metzler. In last year's AAI Workshop on Human Implications of Human-Robot Interaction, Metzler expressed concern that human persons will begin to treat robots as if they are persons and, therefore, develop somewhat "personal" relationships with robots. Metzler and I share the concern that these would be misplaced personal relationships. In other words, we would be expending our time and energy on personal relationships with robots rather than focusing on developing deeper and more meaningful relationship with other persons and with the rest of the natural world. If this phenomenon of misplaced personal relationships were to occur, it might contribute to depersonalization within society as persons spend less time cultivating truly personal relationships. It might also stunt personal development within human community as persons spend less time experiencing the enrichment, challenges, and growth that come from true interpersonal relationships.

I am enough of a science fiction fan to be aware that there has been much speculation about the possibility of robots developing truly human characteristics. *Star Trek*, *Short Circuit*, *The Terminator*, *Bicentennial Man*, *AI*, and numerous other examples of science fiction have investigated what it might be like if robots really were to become persons with self awareness, freedom, thought, sentience, and emotions like human persons experience. Whether such a development is possible, I will leave to the specialists in artificial intelligence to debate. If such developments were to take place, I would be the first to argue that these robot persons ought to be treated as persons with rights and dignity just like human persons

ought to be treated. Such robots would no longer only have instrumental value, they would have inherent worth, intrinsic value, that ought to be respected, and it would be morally wrong to treat them otherwise. If maximizing value in general over the long run is a proper axiom for our actions, it would be appropriate to consider the intrinsic value of such robot persons if they were to exist.

Science fiction aside, we already are capable of making robots with extremely “life-like” human characteristics or other life-like animal characteristics, as shown by my daughters’ robo-cat in our home. The high level of interest in these robots is understandable. They are fascinating machines that are the product of a great deal of creativity and advanced technology. Insofar as their existence and use contribute to an increase in value in general for all life over the long run, the world benefits from these robots.

Robots are not inherently morally problematic; however, like so many other forms of technology, how we use them or how we relate to them can be either good or bad, or various shades in between, depending on the consequences for human community and for all life.

Priorities

I am not arguing that the creation of robots with human characteristics is in and of itself a bad thing. In fact as we attempt to recreate human-like characteristics in robots we may gain useful information about how the human mind/body works that might be beneficial for human persons. On a more trivial note, there is also a certain amount of entertainment value in observing and interacting with robots with human-like characteristics. Who doesn’t get a kick out of watching Honda’s ASIMO and seeing persons interact with it? There may be many more yet unknown positive benefits from developing robots in the direction of having more human-like characteristics. However, we need to enter into this age of human-like robots with our eyes open to the potential negative consequences for human community and for the larger ecological community. We will need to keep our axiological priorities straight.

Peace, social justice, and ecological sustainability are three of the most important challenges of our time. As Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us in his “World House” essay, we live together in the world house of our planet, and if we are to live together in peace with justice in a sustainable relationship with nature, we must learn to live and work together and cultivate more positive personal relationships with one another and a greater appreciation for our connection with the larger ecological community. If our use and relations with robots hinder us from developing these interpersonal relationships in our ecological community, then their presence and use become a disvalue

for society and the world. Misplaced personal relationships with robots might hinder us from developing the kind of relationships in human community and ecological community that are necessary to cultivate the virtues of peace, justice and ecological sustainability that are required to build a positive future for our planet.

A Personalist Story about Technology

One of my greatest mentors was the late personalist philosopher/theologian/social ethicist Walter Muelder, who was dean of Boston University School of Theology from 1945-1972 and continued to teach until 1993. Martin Luther King, Jr. credits Muelder for being influential in relation to King’s views and strategies concerning social action and engagement. Muelder was passionate about the value of persons and the need to personalize human communities so that each person might live a meaningful life with dignity.

In the midst of a class discussion on the importance of cultivating personal relationships in community, Muelder mentioned a practice of his that seemed quaint to me at the time, but the wisdom of it has become more apparent to me over the years. Muelder told the class that he refused to use ATM machines. My first thought was that he simply was not comfortable with the technology, but that was not Muelder’s reasoning at all. He refused to use ATM machines because he enjoyed seeing and speaking to the persons who worked inside the bank. He had been banking in the same building for years, and he knew all of the tellers by name. He knew something about all of them. They were important to him, and he was not about to let an ATM machine come between him and his personal relationship with the persons working in the bank.

The point of this story is not that ATM machines are inherently bad but that personal relationships in human community are important, and we ought to intentionally find opportunities to cultivate personal relationships. There are so many forces of depersonalization in the world; it is necessary to find ways of personalizing our communities. Robots, like so many other forms of technology, can be used to depersonalize communities or to make them more personal. The way we use and relate to robots can decrease our awareness of our connection with the natural world, or it can help us relate to nature in more positive and sustainable ways. If we take robots personally, i.e., relate to them as persons even though they are not truly persons, we run the risk of not taking the time or making the appropriate effort to cultivate relationships with real persons and with the natural world of which we are all a part. It is our moral responsibility to avoid such depersonalizing consequences as we attempt to foster a world of greater peace, social justice, and ecological sustainability.

References

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