

# Mind of the Universe

## Robots in Society: Blessing or Curse?

Filippo Pianca, October 2020

*How can AI and robots be combined so that they complement and contribute to our society, instead of posing a threat?*

If we consider AI as the mind of a robot, this will take into question the way we want to build and program this AI. Do we want a biased and factious AI, or do we want an impartial system that can really improve our well-being?

Even if the question is rhetorical, we need to think about a moral implementation of programs into robots: the way AI will be designed will determine the way robots will behave. Therefore, the combination of software and hardware needs to be responsible and thoughtful, not just superficially: a safe, reliable, accountable, and open AI means a safe, reliable, and accountable robot. This is indispensable if we want these technologies to bring contributions to society. But it is not sufficient.

We have to be aware of anthropomorphism: why designing intelligent robots that look and think like humans? Are we trying to replicate ourselves transcending evolutionary times?

I think that in order to have beneficial, reliable, and safe robots, implemented with unbiased AI, it is necessary to move beyond any kind of anthropomorphism: robots should not resemble or behave like humans. Can you imagine being old and being cared for by a robot, knowing it is a machine, although it looks exactly like a human person? Would not it be disorienting? This confusion would not help the caring activity.

I think that robots should not be anthropomorphized, but this does not imply that AI should not be ethically aligned with us. The new form of life that we are creating can be new and unique under many perspectives: it can have its own qualities, ways of thinking, and aesthetics, but at the same time it can be aligned with our values.

This might sound contradictory, or even impossible; instead, I think it can make sense: since robots are and will be tools (even tools are a form of lives, after all), helping us enhancing our performances and lives, why should we make these tools (Virginia Dignum calls them “puppets”) human-like? Would not it mean, indirectly, that we are trying to create a new form of slavery made of electronic machines resembling humans? For this reason, robots should be robots, not people: they need their own ontological space. But since intelligent robots will be in every house, hospital, car, and work-place (at least in some parts of the world - this is a different topic which I will not address here), they will need to be trained to understand and behave properly, i.e. accordingly to what we will want them to do and how we will want them to do it. This will require an ethical framework: robots will need to be aligned with our values. This is necessary if we want them to be “special” tools.

This expression, “special tools”, contains my suggestion: robots should be robots while being at the same time ethically aligned. One could object: at this point, even if not anthropomorphized, would not they have a sort of moral standing? I would reply that, even if understanding or knowing human moral values is not sufficient for moral standing, robots would still require some sort of ethical consideration.

As we usually treat respectfully objects that we bought after working hard, or that someone gifted us, or that we generally care about, likewise robots should be treated in a respectful manner. Not because they intrinsically deserve it (someone could say they do), but because treating with regard and thankfulness a tool that is helping us in various ways can really enhance our trusting relationship with it, as well as our moral well-being. After all, it is just a human matter.

This suggestion can retake into consideration a point introduced earlier: the use of robotics in elderly care. Would they feel less lonely with a non-anthropomorphic robot, or with an anthropomorphic one? The answer might sound easy, but we need to be aware of naiveties: an anthropomorphic robot could make the elderly think about the people that are not caring for them. In other words, they would probably feel more lonely since they would understand that the robot is the replacement of people (relatives in the first place) who now are missing from the caring scene. The elderly - here considered in any mental or physical condition - would face an anthropomorphic robot which would indirectly confess: “I am here, in the form of a human person, even though I am not one, since other people can not be here, either because there are no funds for hiring social professionals or because your family did not care that much”.

Again, one could argue: so what is the difference with a non-anthropomorphic robot? Would not it “confess” the same thing? In my opinion, a non-humanoid caring robot would make a difference in the loneliness part: the elderly would not, at least immediately, associate its presence with the absence of other people. They would interact with it just like they interact with their tv, radio, or smartphone: the caring robot, however, would prove to be different, since it would reply (with words and behaviors) to the requests and comments of the elderly. These replies, of course, would need to be ethically aligned with what we as humans want and desire for ourselves, especially if in delicate age.

This does not imply that the elderly will not feel lonely with the non-anthropomorphic robot. However, it might be reasonable to think that with a non-anthropomorphic robot they will feel less lonely compared to the companionship of an anthropomorphic robot, for the reasons exposed above. Again, this might sound counter-intuitive, but if we are trying to substitute human care with robots that implicitly say “I am your new artificial caregiver”, what is the future of interpersonal and human relationships? Instead of pretending to artificially replicate what we will try to abandon, why not create new and unique forms of interactions?

This, of course, will present many ethical and social problems: first of all, the disorientation of the elderly being touched, moved, carried, washed, changed, and cared for by an artificial entity. This is understandable. How can we fix this issue? A solution

might lie in the way this entity is programmed to behave: supposing that it will not be anthropomorphic - since we do not want to cause immediate loneliness or melancholia feelings - the robot still ought to move and interact with the elderly in a safe, reliable, and accountable manner. This will derive from its internal AI. Here the circle closes up.

In a nutshell, my solution to the final challenge of the course is that we do not need to externally anthropomorphize robots in order to make them safe and reliable (this includes implicit anthropomorphism, as in the case of the Somnox Sleep Robot: it is pretty clear that it is produced to remind us of the gentleness of a newborn). Robots should be robots, we should immediately recognize them for what they are (tools), while we should not disguise them as people, since this might cause real disorientation and confusion, especially in the elderly. What we really need is to focus on their “interior” part: their moral values. The ethical alignment does not need a humanoid design: what it needs is responsible, safe, accountable, thoughtful, and open rules in order for the robots to be trusted and considered helpful.

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