

## Machines and Robots: Ethical Considerations

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Review of *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics*, by David Gunkel (MIT Press 2012), 256 pp., hardback (978-0262017435) and eBook (978-0262306355)

Review of *Robot Ethics: The Ethical and Social Implications of Robots*, edited by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney, and George A. Bekey (MIT Press 2012), 386 pp., hardback (978-0262016667), paperback (978-0262526005), and eBook (978-0262297752)

Robots will play an increasingly prominent role in our lives over the next few decades. Like computers and mobile phones have done in recent years, robots have the potential to change the way we perform our everyday tasks, re-shaping the society in which we live and possibly our very notion of our own humanity. As robots take on more roles and responsibilities, we will be forced to confront not only questions regarding the ethical implications of those actions, but whether or not the robots themselves deserve to be treated in a manner commensurate with the ethical obligations that we owe one another.

David J. Gunkel's *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics* and *Robot Ethics: The Ethical and Social Implications of Robots*, edited by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney, and George A. Bekey, are two new books which directly address the ethical considerations currently emerging in the realm of robotics and artificial intelligence. Gunkel addresses the issues surrounding the ethical treatment that robots deserve from other moral agents, as well as the idea that robots themselves might be considered moral agents. Lin et al. examine the debate surrounding the ethical and legal constraints that encompass the actions that robots are currently performing, and will continue to perform with increasing efficiency and autonomy, particularly robots employed by military forces.

The author of *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology*, David Gunkel is no stranger to the contemporary discourse surrounding the ethics of technology (2007). In *The Machine Question*, he presents readers with an attempt to “learn to attend to the machine question in all its complexity” (ix). Prior to actually answering any of the numerous ethical implications that will inevitably arise as robots and other machines begin to proliferate even more widely into everyday life, it will be important to familiarize ourselves with the philosophical antecedents to the important questions which will frame the debate. Gunkel’s approach examines the twin ideas of moral agency and moral patiency, seeking to identify various facets of these intellectual constructs which might apply to robots. His objective is simply to investigate whether or not machines could ever be moral agents, or in the case of moral patiency, whether they are owed the ethical consideration given to other moral agents. Gunkel studiously avoids any declarative statements to the effect that machines should or should not be treated as moral agents. What he does do is prepare the intellectual framework for the debate which has already begun, providing readers with a historical and philosophical template through which to guide the discussion.

The term “person” is used extensively throughout *The Machine Question* as an example of a moral agent. Many readers will have the mindset that the definition of a “person” is set in stone, and that it is intuitively obvious what a person is and what rights and responsibilities they have as both moral agents and moral patients. However, Gunkel demonstrates that the term has not been legally defined, and in a number of cases its meaning has changed over time to accommodate the inclusion of different groups, notably women, people of color, and children. In some cases, animals are under consideration for inclusion into the category of moral agent and patient. This correlation of animal rights with machine rights is an important element in Gunkel’s argument, but again, he only presents the idea in order for readers to reflect on it and consider the implications. He does not proclaim that robots will ever be granted the status of moral agents, but if they are, then one will be required to put forth arguments similar to ones already proposed for other groups that have been granted the rights and responsibilities of moral agency.

*Robot Ethics*, edited by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney and George A. Bekey examines the ethical and social implications of robots from a slightly different angle. As with David Gunkel, these three editors bring a wealth of experience in this field to the debate. Lin is the director of the Ethics and Emerging Science group at California Polytechnic University, which is also home to Abney, a Senior Lecturer and philosopher of science, and Bekey, Distinguished Professor of Engineering.

*Robot Ethics* presents articles from twenty four distinguished contributors, to include professors of ethics and philosophy, computer scientists, and other specialists working in the fields of robotics and cognitive science. While Gunkel provides readers with an overview of the parameters of the debate on ethical considerations for robots and machines, Lin, Abney, and Bekey delve into the details of ethical considerations relating to particular types of robots, primarily from a teleological perspective. For example, *Robot Ethics* is divided into eight chapters covering such diverse topics as military robots, medical robots and machines, and even robots “employed” in the sex industry. The book also addresses ethical concerns surrounding robots themselves, such as whether or not they should ever be granted moral agency.

Readers would do well to first read David Gunkel’s *The Machine Question* in order to introduce themselves to the complex field of robot ethics. Scholars and students may also find a new way to look at this subject if they are already working in the field. Having situated themselves in the debate, readers should then pick up a copy of Lin, Abney and Bekey’s *Robot Ethics*, both to provide another avenue of inquiry into this fascinating topic, as well as to examine in greater detail some of the more pressing, immediate concerns surrounding the contemporary use of robots in a number of areas. Both books are highly recommended to both the general reader as well as to experts in the field of robotics, philosophy and ethics.

## Reference

Gunkle, David. 2007. *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.