

Humanoid robots and the borders of the social world. A cross-cultural analysis between Europe and Japan

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Abstract

This paper investigates fundamental normative issues of the social world caused by the development of autonomous humanoid robots, and explores the question of whether and how these intelligent technological creatures could become equivalent members of a present human-centered society.

In modern democratic societies for which the ethos of human rights is of fundamental importance, it is taken as self-evident that only living human beings are social persons. Every human being is supposed to be treated ethically as well as legally as a person even if she or he is incapacitated from acting meaningfully (e.g., through a serious brain damage). Those who are in coma or with severe dementia can still count on adequate medical treatment as such, as long as they are diagnosed as being alive. For nonhumans, by contrast, there is currently a border which they cannot cross in a generally valid way. For instance, machines are basically not persons in their own right, as human beings are. A computer cannot join the circle of social persons, although some user assigns personhood to it occasionally. In this respect, human beings function as the core institution of modernity which determines the normative and cognitive border of a society.

However, this equation of the realm of the social with the world of humans has been increasingly challenged in recent years, especially by the advent of human-like interactive robots. As empirical findings in cultural anthropology reveal, the premise that only living humans can be social persons does not hold true throughout the ages and cultures. The realm of the social would rather be demarcated by virtue of the historically as well as culturally contingent process of interpretation. According to this notion, it must be considered an open question whether or not artificial humanoids will soon be able to occupy the position of social persons. The fact that machines built in the image of humans are becoming more and more integrated into everyday life, will raise crucial issues about the borders of the social world – not least the normative problems whether or not these intelligent machines should be viewed as subjects of legal rights and duties.

From a sociological standpoint, I analyze such elementary border phenomena which are exemplified in the application fields of robotics in Europe and Japan. My main question is how far the current development of humanoid robots and their entry into the life-world come into collision with the institutional dichotomy between living humans and other entities. In the European context, such a tension can already be observed within the emerging ethical discourse which warns against some border-crossing approaches, e.g. an attempt to enable full autonomy of robots. In Japan, by contrast, the novel types of technical beings have not been perceived as a latent threat to the exceptional position of humans in the society; but rather, the key concern is a peaceful coexistence with them.