Robot Caregivers: Quality of Life and Emotional Needs in Aged Care

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In this presentation I will argue that a properly expansive understanding of both "quality of life" and of the emotional needs of human beings suggests that the domains in which robot caregivers might make a meaningful contribution to the welfare of older persons are limited. Indeed, acknowledging the central role played by interpersonal recognition and respect in determining individuals' welfare suggests that the development of robot caregivers might even threaten the well-being of those they "care" for. I will begin by outlining three prominent philosophical accounts of well-being, a hedonistic, a desire satisfaction, and an "objective list" account, and argue that the project of developing robot caregivers typically assumes the first or the second of these. However, there are well-known problems with both these accounts, which the idea of robot care often appears to inherit. Paying proper attention to the objective components of well-being suggests that robots will struggle to address the most fundamental challenges to the quality of life of older persons in the societies in which they are being developed. Moreover, it highlights the importance of relations between persons to our understanding of what makes our lives — and the lives of others — go well. A realistic assessment of the nature and economics of the aged-care sector suggests that the introduction of robots may be expected to reduce the opportunities for older persons to experience direct human contact. While robots themselves may act as a medium for interpersonal relationships, there are strong reasons to believe that, to the extent that it is being driven by the interests of engineers and the institutional imperatives of granting agencies rather than the desires of older persons expressed through a suitable deliberative process, the development and application of robot caregivers risks undermining rather than advancing respect for and recognition of older citizens.