



The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics (MIT Press)

By David J. Gunkel

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One of the enduring concerns of moral philosophy is deciding who or what is deserving of ethical consideration. Much recent attention has been devoted to the "animal question" -- consideration of the moral status of nonhuman animals. In this book, David Gunkel takes up the "machine question": whether and to what extent intelligent and autonomous machines of our own making can be considered to have legitimate moral responsibilities and any legitimate claim to moral consideration. The machine question poses a fundamental challenge to moral thinking, questioning the traditional philosophical conceptualization of technology as a tool or instrument to be used by human agents. Gunkel begins by addressing the question of machine moral agency: whether a machine might be considered a legitimate moral agent that could be held responsible for decisions and actions. He then approaches the machine question from the other side, considering whether a machine might be a moral patient due legitimate moral consideration. Finally, Gunkel considers some recent innovations in moral philosophy and critical theory that complicate the machine question, deconstructing the binary agent--patient opposition itself. Technological advances may prompt us to wonder if the science fiction of computers and robots whose actions affect their human companions (think of *HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey*) could become science fact. Gunkel's argument promises to influence future considerations of ethics, ourselves, and the other entities who inhabit this world.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #810482 in Books
- Published on: 2012-07-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .44" w x 6.00" l, 1.15 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 270 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

A formidable new book.... Provides a galaxy of challenging thought.... Gunkel does a fine job of lucid and concise exposition.

(Peter Hankins *Machines Like Us*)

Gunkel's deconstruction is a tour de force that largely succeeds in getting us to 'think otherwise'. His argument that machines have always been the excluded other is convincing.... Gunkel engages the thinking of both 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophers, which I believe is a virtue.... The book is an original contribution to the field and likely to have wide reverberations... careful and remarkably comprehensive.

(*Ethics and Information Technology*)

There is something right about Gunkel's recognition that one can hardly consider the questions of machine morality without being led to more fundamental methodological and meta-ethical issues.... He nevertheless succeeded in connecting the ethics of robots and AI to a much broader ethical discussion than has been represented in the literature on machine ethics to date.

(*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*)

This controversial and thought-provoking book is a must-read for anyone interested in the philosophy of technology and in discussions on artificial intelligence and ethics of information and communication technology. The unprecedented value of the book is that Gunkel not only analyzes important aspects of the immediate problem but also that he places his discussion in the context of philosophical discussions on such related issues as rights discourse. Maybe some day the moral status of machines will be obvious for all of us, but for the present Gunkel's book provides an important voice for discussion on the moral status of machines.

(*International Philosophical Quarterly*)

From the opening pages, *The Machine Question* is a delightful melange of graduate philosophy seminars, solemn debates at science fiction conventions, and weighty discussions over drinks in dimly-lit pubs. It is delightful mainly because such diversity of approach, content, and examples is too rarely found in an academic publication...Gunkel's book is worth reading and will likely find a place in courses dealing with the problems reflected in its title.

(*Essays in Philosophy*)

This book is essential reading for philosophers interested in AI, robot ethics, or animal ethics.

(*AISB Quarterly*)

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.

(*Techne*)

A thought-provoking look at the most interesting question in robot ethics: Can intelligent machines ever be considered as persons? The investigation is an impressively deep dive, drawing from many philosophical schools of thought.

(Patrick Lin, California Polytechnic State University, Ethics + Emerging Sciences Group)

At last, a masterful integration of the many disparate reflections on whether intelligent machines can ever be admitted to the community of moral subjects as either moral agents and/or moral patients. David Gunkel goes on to make a significant contribution to any further discussion of the topic in a final section that deconstructs the machine question from the perspective of continental philosophers including Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. Machines have been the definitive 'other,' not worthy of moral consideration, but as we contemplate the prospect that future machines might be conscious and perhaps even have feelings, we are forced to think deeply about who (or what) should be included in the moral order.

(Wendell Wallach, Yale Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics)

About the Author

David J. Gunkel is Distinguished Teaching Professor and Professor of Communication Technology at Northern Illinois University. He is the author of *Hacking Cyberspace*, *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology* and *Of Remixology: Ethics and Aesthetics After Remix* (MIT Press).

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