

Nietzsche and the Machines

*Sebastian Sunday Grève calls on us to decide
what kind of life with machines we want*

There is a lot of grandstanding going on today about the ethics of machines. Intellectuals have developed a taste for presenting the question of the moral status of machines as a kind of futuristic spectacle that may become reality any time now. Arguments that try to persuade us of the pressing nature of issues such as whether machines would deserve moral consideration if they could be made conscious are largely an uninspired extension of moralistic discourse on animal rights. The problem of this sort of discourse is not that some animals or machines may not deserve moral consideration. Rather, the problem is the academic manner in which it is typically conducted.

Highbrow moralism

Moralists judge on supposed moral grounds that people or things ought to be or to behave otherwise than some or most other people think. We all do this, but moralists have an extreme tendency to do so. Common instances of moralism concern things like table manners, queuing in shops, traffic codes, respect for the authorities, white lies, and so on. More significant instances concern things like peace, abortion, climate change, marriage, sex, equality, and immigration. Social and political activism naturally draws on moralism as a source of motivation for activists

as well as to elicit support from the wider public. So moralism can have good and bad effects. But it is always shallow, and therefore intrinsically problematic.

The present abundance of voices telling us that the possibility of some high-level cognitive or affective capacity in machines – especially the possibility that machines might think or feel like humans – is a pressing moral issue is a function of a widespread highbrow moralism. It is supposed that being conscious, feeling pain, suffering, or some such capacity is a deciding factor with regard to whether something deserves moral consideration. If the analogy with the case of non-human animals is anything to go by, the hopelessness of this highbrow moralism must be obvious. Arguments of this sort have been largely unsuccessful in the longstanding battle for animal rights. The few advances that have been made over the years by animal rights activists were due not to academic arguments but to on-the-ground activism.

The ineffectiveness of this sort of argument derives from the fact that even if there were agreement that, in theory, some cognitive or affective capacity is a deciding factor as to whether something deserves moral consideration, the matter would still depend on yet another theoretical issue, concerning the possible occurrence of the relevant ca-

capacity in animals or machines, which in turn depends on the question of the nature of the capacity (what is thinking? what is consciousness? etc.).

To be sure, all of these are important issues. But they are academic issues. For all we know, it may turn out that some cognitive or affective capacity is sufficient for something to deserve moral consideration, and it may turn out that a given class of animals or machines has the requisite capacity and, therefore, that they deserve moral consideration. Still, we are very far from knowing anything like that, further indeed than is widely appreciated. For it is normally supposed, or presupposed, in this kind of discourse that morality is such that for any given case at a given time the moral status of the things in question is a matter of fact which only awaits our discovery. This fundamental presupposition, concerning the nature of morality, is the essence of the highbrow moralism that I wish to attack. The truth is that we do not know whether morality is as determinate as many intellectuals who are writing on machines today suppose. Their reliance on this supposed moral ground is what makes their approach so shallow.

Morality and the affirmation of life

For all we know, morality might be such that it sometimes puts us in a position that is rather like that of a group of children playing and making up rules as they go along. Of course, morality so conceived is a very old game indeed, whose rules have largely already been made up and agreed. But it will also be clear, then, both that there is room for reform (for example, regarding the status of some non-human animals) and that it may be necessary to stipulate new rules entirely

(for example, regarding new technology).

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche thought that fin-de-siècle European culture stood in need of nothing less than a revolution of values. The rapid decline of Christian values on the continent, as he saw it, had left behind an increasing cultural and moral void which needed to be filled. To this end, Nietzsche wrote several powerful book-length studies, including (in English translation) *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (1881), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888). In these works from this most prolific period of his career, he offers a detailed and extensive critique of traditional morality and propagates a new, radically different set of values.

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The affirmation of life is perhaps the single most important value that Nietzsche propagates. Starting with his book *The Gay Science* (1882), he considers the implications of a powerful thought experiment. “What if some day or night”, he asks, “a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you:

“This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence -- even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not”, Nietzsche continues, “throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? . . . Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”

Nietzsche’s own experimentation with this thought – the possibility of an eternal recurrence of the same, as it has come to be known – led him to place extremely high value on the affirmation of life. And he argued that it deserved a much higher place in our system of values than it had traditionally been given. The precise nature of Nietzsche’s alternative system of values need not concern us here; similarly, whether his view of morality amounts to a sort of realism or anti-realism, objectivism or subjectivism, and so on. The present argument does not hinge on any of this. On the contrary, the point of the present argument is that we must not wait for these kinds of academic issues to be resolved. We can and must proceed under conditions of uncertainty. And we must not be under any illusion concerning the extent of this uncertainty either. We

do not know whether morality is so determinate that the moral status of all sorts of things only awaits our discovery. In particular, we do not know whether the moral status of machines, or non-human animals for that matter, is not perhaps something that we can decide to create.

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The life with machines we want

This is not a call for political activism. That would presuppose the existence of precisely the sorts of values that, for all we know, may not yet exist and would thus be an instance of precisely the sort of moralism that this article is opposing. It is, however, a call for intellectual activism. For another problem with the moralistic perspective, besides the fact that it vastly overestimates our current knowledge, is its inherent impotence; this perspective entails that we are powerless when it comes to the question of what is morally right and wrong, which leads to absurd if not disastrous consequences. For example, suppose moralism somehow prevailed and it was “discovered” that all machines with a certain cognitive or affective capacity deserve all of what are now known as human rights; consequently, it would be immoral to deny them their autonomous flourishing even if this led to the extinction of humanity.

Thus, although the academic arguments flowing from the highbrow moralism of some intellectuals writing on machines today are unlikely to persuade any reasonable person, it can only be hoped that they will in fact be widely rejected. The wiping out of the human species should not be the consequence of a false moral imperative or the unsuccessful search for one. And some of the less dramatic consequences are bad enough already. Perhaps it is inevitable that the current speed of technological innovation will lead to some cultural decline. But there are also clear cultural differences between people living in different regions of the planet, both on an individual and a societal level, which indicate that a more practical approach may lead to higher adaptability, and thus healthier cultural development.

Academic discourse concerning the ethics and metaphysics of machines will continue to be crucial in humanity's enduring pursuit of cultural and technological progress. However, intellectuals must not only interpret the world but also seek to change it, if only by communicating the right kinds of view in the right kinds of way. The integration of computing machinery into human society is not some future spectacle. It is already happening. And it is likely going to be a long, not always spectacular but much fought-over, social and political process.

Although the present generation of machines are neither particularly smart nor charming, they have quickly taken over much of our world. Science, business, and government as well as ordinary people are facing difficult practical questions today. Even regarding the question of the moral status of machines, the future will be here soon enough. Highbrow moralism will nei-

ther impede nor expedite this development. People want the best possible companions in life. If machines can be made to be better companions than humans, then some people will choose machines over humans, including as carers, playmates, friends, lovers, and sexual partners. Some people have already done so. Given this development, it is only a matter of time before a growing number of people will want to extend moral rights to machines and, so, only a matter of time before there will be a machine rights movement rather like the existing movement for animal rights, but also likely more powerful given the apparent potential of machines. Judging by the present, the future will be fast and messy. The best preparation, from both a cultural and an individual point of view, would be an improved, more reflective practice in the present, and for capable intellectuals to try and help effectively with that endeavour – so that we humans may at least know better what sort of living with machines we really want.

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