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The machine question: Critical perspectives on AI, robots, and ethics

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has led to its success as a mass medium. At the same time, it is this very quality—the computer as television, the computer as cinema, and so on—that threatens to perpetuate, needlessly so given the underlying architecture of networked data flow, a fundamentally passive relationship with information. The Web’s broad simulation or absorption of the essence of television (one-way audio-visuality), for instance, risks recreating, or even amplifying, the prevailing download-only or download-mostly culture in which, for Lunenfeld, “the hardest task that television asks of its viewers is turning the power off after they have turned it on” (p. 8).

The meme of simulation, in this regard, risks running counter to that of participation. “From the mimeograph machine, to the advent of videotape, to fax technologies, to public access cable television, each new communication technology brings with it a new potential for participation” (p. 67), Lunenfeld argues. The networked computer is no different, having given rise to a multitude of one-to-many communications, defined by principles such as open source and perpetual beta, with the shift from a consumption to a production model a defining feature of its genetic lineage.

This Richard Dawkins-inspired evolutionary take on computer history is mapped most explicitly in an innovative 35-page afterword (which, per Lunenfeld’s instructions, might also function as a foreword or even as a sidebar to the primary text) in which successive generations of our digital forebears are used to illuminate the present. Key figures illustrate not a totalizing historical account but a much more selective, whistle-stop tour of the computer’s “rich and deep past” (p. 143), which takes in familiar pioneers including Vannevar Bush, J.C.R. Licklider, Thomas Watson, Sr., Thomas Watson, Jr., Douglas Engelbart, Alan Kay, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Tim Berners-Lee, Linus Torvalds, Larry Page, and Sergey Brin—a veritable who’s who of “programmers, millionaires, and dreamers” (p. 145), as Lunenfeld puts it. Via this eclectic “collection of geniuses, warriors, pacifists, cranks, visionaries, entrepreneurs, great successes, and miserable failures” (p. xiii), the computer’s evolutionary ascent is historicized and personified, giving perspective and context to today’s tensions.

Ultimately, whether or not one agrees with Lunenfeld’s polemic—and a polemic or manifesto it surely is—there is no doubting the timeliness and currency of its prognostic provocations. Indeed, it is testament to Lunenfeld that one’s response after reading (or, put another way, after downloading its content) may very well be of the upload variety, as the tale of the computer continues to be told by the countless millions who interact with its networked iterations every day.

David Gunkel, *The machine question: Critical perspectives on AI, robots, and ethics*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012; 272 pp.: ISBN 9780262017435, \$35.00 (hbk)

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Although not necessarily an ethical quandary that most face on a daily basis, “the machine question” has a long history within modern culture. Entities such as H.A.L. in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), the replicants in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), and the Puppet Master in *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1996) (to name just a few) have all

called for questioning the moral status of machines. Gunkel's "machine question" intends to make a space within moral philosophy to address questions usually visited in these speculative fictions, such as "what kind of moral claim might such mechanisms have?" and, possibly more importantly, "what would it mean to articulate and practice an ethics of this subject?" (p. 2).

What begins seemingly as speculative philosophy on a not-too-distant future of artificial general intelligence, *The Machine Question* reads, at first glance at least, as an overview of moral philosophy, reviewing the history of moral agency, considering human rights, and moral patiency, and considering animal rights. The third and final chapter, "Thinking Otherwise," shares a similar subject matter insofar as it turns the tables on moral philosophy again through a reconsideration of Levinasian ethics vis-a-vis Heideggerian consideration of "thing-ness" (p. 191), while finally engaging the exclusion of machines from ethical consideration by deconstructing the patient/agent binary of moral philosophy.

Gunkel's critique emerges from engaging the literature among the patient/agent binary, for which the majority of the book reads as a comprehensive and straightforward rehearsal of the body of literature speaking to the patient/agent binary. The first chapter, "Moral Agency," begins by first interrogating the history of moral agency via its history of inclusion and exclusion. Gunkel juxtaposes this moral philosophical history through a brief recitation of the philosophy of technology, especially via the commonplace instrumentalist theory of technology, that technology is merely a tool: a means to an end.

Not satisfied with agentic structuring, the second chapter develops Gunkel's study further in "Moral Patiency," the other side of the agent/patient binary. Gunkel expands the overview through a comprehensive examination of the patient side of moral philosophy by reviewing the origins of animal studies, additionally engaging the newer subdiscipline of environmental studies. Both the first and second chapters are quite extensive in their account of the development of the moral agent and patient; however, while the reasoning becomes apparent later, it sometimes appears that Gunkel recites the development of these complex philosophical arguments only to toss them aside when they come up lacking in his search in regard to "the machine question."

The third and final chapter, "Thinking Otherwise," represents an attempt to consider the role of the "thing" or technology through a "mashup" (p. 185) of Heideggerian ontology and Levinasian ethics. Gunkel appears to find some solace via "the machine question" through this "mashup," considering both the approach of the "other" in the Levinasian sense, as well as through a series of Heidegger's stages of considerations of objects (pp. 189–191). Through these conglomerations, Gunkel expands the theoretical overview while testing the limits of the patient/agent binary, only to find the structural limitations of the patient/agent binary lacking in the face of the "machine question."

Although it stands as a helpful comprehensive overview of moral philosophy, Gunkel's consideration of the "machine" throughout the book remains (undoubtedly on purpose) primarily ambiguous. His "machine" for which he wishes us to consider an ethics remains defined insofar as it is "not" human, animal, or "thing." The "machine" is only defined against that which is included in ethical consideration, or, as the title of the final chapter suggests, "otherwise."

Those looking for an expansion of moral philosophy to include “the machine question,” possibly the most radical of alterities, may be left wanting. Rather than an engagement of machines within moral realms, *The Machine Question* is best read as a treatise on how the current trajectory of moral philosophy is found lacking when faced with “the machine question.” The ambiguity of “the machine” lasts throughout the book, sitting outside of the arguments, employed in the service of tearing apart the history of moral philosophy. Only in the last few pages does “the machine question” become clear as not *how to include machines* in ethical consideration but instead posits the question that destabilizes the structure of ethical philosophy, as in the penultimate moment Gunkel exposes the revelation that “the machine is not necessarily a question *for* ethics; it is first and foremost a question *of* ethics” (p. 211).

“The Machine Question” occupies an intersecting space between a few current important threads of philosophy. First of all, and called out within the book, “The Machine Question” speaks directly to and with animal studies. Although eventually found lacking against “the machine question,” Gunkel directly engages many of the important texts within the field, namely Donna Haraway’s (2008) *When Species Meet* and Jacques Derrida’s (2008) *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Additionally, “The Machine Question” also makes for interesting companion reading to such recent works as Ian Bogost’s (2012) *Alien Phenomenology*, Alex Galloway’s (2012) *The Interface Effect*, and Levi Bryant’s (2011) *The Democracy of Objects*, as each of these attempts to disengage from the anthropocentrism of their engagements. Like all of these comrades, and in typical philosophical fashion, *The Machine Question* offers few answers, yet instead it attempts at better questions, for which it is quite successful.

While more concerned with moral philosophy than “new media,” Gunkel’s call to consider “the machine question” remains the last speculative “new” of “new media,” one that, like any good philosophy, helps to reconfigure the consideration of the present. In the end, *The Machine Question* may frustrate those that look for answers, but succeeds at prodding at the edges of established tradition within philosophical discourse through the inclusion of popular “new media” speculations.

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