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Review of "The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics"

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Book Review | *The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics*

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***The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots, and Ethics*; David J. Gunkel. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012. xiv + 256 pp., \$35 hc., ISBN 978-0-262-01743-5**

As I write this review, spell-checked with red lines and grammar checked with green—trusting that the machinery of the electronic world will deliver the review to the editor and then, again machine-processed, to the reader, it is hard not to agree with David Gunkel that the conventional boundaries between human and machine are increasingly blurred.

Perhaps nowhere are those boundaries more blurry than in the area of communications technology, where less and less of our communication takes place unmediated by the devices that shape, control and enable conversation at a distance.

As Gunkel observes, these devices are designed and programmed in such a way to mimic human interaction so successfully that the Turingesque goal—of fooling customers into thinking that the supplier really cares about their satisfaction and will accommodate requests to ensure it—is closer by the upgrade. We daily find ourselves in electronic queues, logging in, downloading, responding like Pavlov’s dog to whatever these tools require of us to grant access to some anticipated treasure.

The Machine Question: Critical Perspectives on AI, Robots and Ethics is Gunkel’s exploration of human-machine interaction, focused on the questions around ethics that it raises. While the normal set of ethical questions would reflect on how humans use machines to do things and the moral dimensions of such activity, he takes an entirely different tack: whether machines are or will ever be deserving of moral consideration themselves.

More specifically, *The Machine Question* provides a philosophical topography of the interactions between humans and machines from the perspective of the fundamental issues raised by the study of ethics. Should machines become autonomous, what does this mean? And to what extent does autonomy—which for Gunkel goes beyond the idea that machines and their activities are merely the product of human intent and design—entail moral consideration as a result?

From the opening pages, *The Machine Question* is a delightful mélange of graduate philosophy seminars, solemn debates at science fiction conventions, and weighty discussion over drinks in dimly-lit drinking establishments. It is delightful mainly because such diversity of approach, content and examples is too rarely found in an academic publication. As a consequence, the book is a challenging read for those whose own background is less eclectic.

For myself, having read virtually everything Isaac Asimov ever wrote and wistfully having been too young to see *2001: A Space Odyssey* on its release, I would likely join the bevy of sci-fi buffs who would challenge and debate the examples Gunkel uses. Yet he manages deftly to include the issues raised in cinema and literature about the Machine, ranging back to Rene Descartes and forward to engage both Mary Shelley (as author of *Frankenstein*) and Mary Wollstonecraft (as author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*), en route to the land ethic of Aldo Leopold and ending with Martin Heidegger's "Thing."

In searching for the right words to describe his book, therefore, "philosophical topography" (though not suggested by my electronic thesaurus) seemed the most apt. Whatever quibbles or objections that might be raised about certain of the features of the ethical landscape he depicts, my book is full of underlines and marginal comments on the insights he offers, either of his own or of others, about the question itself.

It is "the question," however, that defines the topography. Rather than select an answer to whether machines will ever deserve ethical consideration, Gunkel sidesteps the inevitable duality of the yes/no response. Instead, he takes the path of deconstruction, arguing that the reason we find ourselves impaled on the horns of such a duality is because of how we have defined the terms of the debate.

In the first of the three chapters that constitute his book, he deconstructs the meaning of moral agency. He demonstrates the inevitable anthropocentrism of such a question, how it turns ethics into an exclusionary exercise in which, depending on what category in which potential "agents" are placed, the answer is effectively predetermined. Whether the circle is

drawn large or small, there are still those found outside of it because there is some deficiency in terms of what those inside possess as “agents.”

In the second chapter, he considers the flipside of moral agency (moral patiency), as moral patients are the objects of moral consideration even if they are not agents themselves. Gunkel delves into the parallels to animal rights, how animals (while lacking moral agency as defined in Cartesian terms) are still worthy of moral consideration. The self-conscious circle of “agency,” however, is replaced by another (though larger) circle of “patiency.” Again, the operation is exclusionary.

Gunkel’s philosophical map-making is obviously intended to draw the reader toward to the third and final chapter, “Thinking Otherwise.” One would expect this to provide the alternative to the dualities reflected in determining either moral agency or moral patiency, and certainly the first part of the chapter looks promising. But here, again, Gunkel advances, elucidates and then dismisses—I think hastily—the options that he presents. For example, the “fundamental reorientation” of ontology he finds in the work of Emmanuel Levinas receives short shrift, as does its extension by Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco. To accept the perfunctory dismissal of Derrida that such ideas are undermined by their “humanist” tendencies, after such an exhaustive tour of alternatives, raises suspicions that the philosophical topography is more of a shaggy dog story, without satisfactory conclusion.

The subsequent move toward Heidegger, moreover, is even less lucid than Heidegger’s work itself. To find in “The Question Concerning Technology” and *Being and Time* a better answer as to whether machines deserve moral consideration—one that is somehow less “humanistic” or dualistic than other options—strains the limits of credulity. While I appreciate the concepts Heidegger advanced, especially in his discussions of the nature of technology, the idea of the “standing reserve” of potential awaiting human discovery or use reifies technology in unacceptable ways. It is an ontological error, parallel to the equivalent reification and similar error reflected in discussions of “the Machine.”

In fact, I found a much more palatable option in his discussion of Leopold’s “land ethic.” Gunkel observes it is the whole of the relation that is worthy of moral consideration, not by any individual virtue of agency or patiency, but entirely because it is situated within myriad relationships, each of which are important in some crucial way to the health and viability of the whole. This would seem to be “thinking otherwise,” as the eventual object of the book ostensibly was to be.

I use these words deliberately, because for all my amusement, marginalia and furrowed brows throughout his book, the concluding pages were the least satisfactory. I had assumed

that there was an end to the journey, that the commentaries on such a wide variety of topographical features were akin to the pages of a guidebook, leading toward some destination, some reason for undertaking the trip.

This turned out not to be the case. While Gunkel might claim this kind of resolution was never his intention, the elaboration and reasoned dismissals along the way led me to expect that there would be something tangible at the end, even if it was defined more by exclusion from all those elements that proved unsatisfactory. Reaching the final pages, I did not feel any closer to a resolution of the question as to whether machines deserve moral consideration than I was at the beginning.

To be fair, this is the nature of a topographical map, philosophical or otherwise. It is not something that leads to a destination, not some guidebook for the journey but a description of the features of the landscape—what things look like, rather than what they mean or why.

From this perspective, Gunkel's book is worth reading and will likely find a place in courses dealing with the problems reflected in its title. Artificial intelligence, robots, machine ethics—these things are all *au courant* and the subject of much discussion, however fruitless in the end he might feel such discussion to be. He does a good job of surveying the landscape, identifying its prominent features, exploring the ideas that are represented, and so on, and for these reasons, I would recommend *The Machine Question*.

For me, however, the most interesting outcome is his challenge to “think otherwise.” His ontological deconstruction of the issues of moral agency and moral patiency lead me to consider another response to the insoluble duality of exclusionary ethics.

I suggest, “thinking otherwise,” that the question as to whether machines deserve moral consideration is derived in a time and culture whose perspectives necessitated duality. Rather than focusing on Heidegger, it would have been more fruitful for Gunkel to focus more on the implications of the Cartesian split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, specifically what it meant to be “human” within Renaissance and Enlightenment perspectives.

What if, for example, the insoluble duality reflect in “Man or Machine” is the product, not of the scaling up of machines to match, first animals, and then humans, but the scaling down to animalistic and mechanical terms of what it means to be “human”? In the Machine Age, have machines become more human, or have we become less?

Perhaps the wisest words, in the end, are those that Lieutenant Commander Data (of *Star Trek: Next Generation* fame) received from the judge in answer to “the question,” as Gunkel notes (44). It is not whether or not machines have a soul that matters, but whether they—like us—are free to find out the answer for themselves.