Chapter 87
Animal Rights and Robot Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates challenges which anthropocentric and pathocentric ethics have to face when confronted with moral considerations about non-human animals, especially so-called disenhanced animals, and a new class of technological artifacts, namely social robots. Referring to the case of animal welfare, robot ethics emerges as a new discipline that has not yet reflected on the ideological biases that commonly underlie moral judgments toward animals and find expression in robot ethics, too. As a consequence, robot ethics perpetuates the "work of purification," that is, the isolation and definition of a particular entity possessing a moral status. Whenever such an entity is defined, the definition excludes all those entities which could likewise possess a moral status but do not fit exactly to the pre-specified definition. The crucial question, then, is whether to seek an ethic of unconditional compassion that doesn't allow itself to be restricted by ideology and is therefore convenient for animal rights and robot ethics as well.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an analysis of weak spots in traditional ethical concepts, namely anthropocentric and pathocentric ethics. It depicts the challenges these ethical approaches have to face when confronted with moral considerations about non-human animals, particularly so-called disenhanced animals and social robots. These challenges point to the need for a new ethical approach, an ethic of compassion. Such an ethical approach is broader and more inclusive than anthropocentric and pathocentric ethics – it extends ethical considerations to insentient and non-living entities. An ethic of compassion is forearmed for the future, when entities like autonomous social robots and disenhanced animals will increasingly blur the boundaries between sentient and insentient beings, the distinction between animate life and inanimate matter (MacDonald, 2002) – a distinction that in itself poses a great challenge for traditional ethical approaches. This paper is an experiment, an attempt to depict a borderless ethic that can deal with future inventions and developments.

First of all, the author presents an ethical approach in the field of robotics, analyzing Kate Darling's extension of moral rights to social robots and delineating the underlying Kantian philosophical arguments. The author then argues that collaborations between robot ethics and animal welfare don't sufficiently reflect on the ideological biases identified by Melanie Joy as "carnism" that commonly conduct human moral judgments of other animals. Considering Joy's deliberations, the author delineates how different perceptions of different species and entities result in different ethical approaches, all of which perform the "work of purification" (Latour, 2012), separating humans from other animals, sentient beings from insentient things, or living entities from lifeless ones. Purification ethics overlook insights from different scientific disciplines and new developments in the field of robotics and genetic engineering that increasingly blur the differentiations mentioned above. Traditional ethical approaches stipulate specific properties to determine the moral status of an entity, and all these approaches are at some point exclusive. Consequently, the author tries to outline an ethic of compassion that overcomes the anthropocentric, carnistic border regime. Ethical approaches are mostly restricted to specific entities with a moral status, although one can show that the scope of entities that come into question, at least as moral patients, can be widened. Hence, the circle of compassion, which is usually restricted, can be rendered more inclusive.

ROBOT ETHICS

Robot ethics, in the sense of extending legal and moral rights to social robots, as prominently presented by Kate Darling (Darling, 2016), has its origins in the philosophy of Kant, who asserted that only humans are able to incur liabilities; hence, humans have moral duties only to other humans.[1] Although Kant stresses that only human beings possess moral status, he also maintains that the cruel treatment of animals should be prevented because it would diminish the human ability to feel compassion, which in itself is a precious predisposition essential to a peaceful human community (Kant, 1977, p. 579). Kant believes it's wrong to abuse animals not because any harm is done to the animals themselves, but because doing so would derogate the moral character of the abuser. Subsequently, one might be tempted to treat humans in a harmful way (Ascione, 2001). According to this moral perspective, harming animals is wrong not because of a duty to the animals themselves but as an indirect protection of humans (Boat, 1995; Kellert & Felthous, 1985).

According to this Kantian approach, animals themselves have no insight into moral law and therefore no rights – they are neither subjects nor objects of obligations. But one can differentiate between first order obligations that encompass obligations among rational beings and second order obligations that encompass the indirect obligations of rational beings towards irrational beings. The reasoning behind that differentiation is that second order obligations encourage insight into first order obligations. If people stick to second order obligations and don't mistreat animals, their restraint promotes socially desirable behavior and moral correctness in general. To pay attention to the welfare of animals and refrain from harming, torturing or killing them merely serves the purpose of creating a peaceful and amicable human community. In this exclusive ethical approach that separates humans from nonhuman beings, animals have no intrinsic value.

But what happens if we bring social robots into play and let them take on the role of the animals in this approach? Darling assumes that certain types of robot protection laws analogous to animal abuse laws would fit into the current legal framework (Darling, 2016). These laws wouldn't bear on robots in general but particularly on social robots – robots that on the one hand resemble humans in their physi-

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