

Futuristic robots, friend or foe?

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A leading robotics expert will outline some of the ethical pitfalls of near-future robots to a Parliamentary group today at the House of Commons. Professor Noel Sharkey from the University of Sheffield will explain that robots are in many ways beneficial to mankind, but there are limitations and we should proceed with caution.

In his talk, Professor Sharkey will warn of the many moral and ethical dilemmas associated with recent developments in robotics.

Robots are now entering homes for domestic service, taking away many menial tasks that humans dislike, including cleaning floors and windows. They are harvesting fruit, milking cows, pumping petrol and building cars. They are faster and more efficient at many of these jobs than a human could be.

Professor Sharkey, who owns his own robot vacuum cleaner, said: "These type of robots are helping mankind to take away the tedious jobs at home. Also the recent developments in robot surgery are hugely beneficial for all of us. The da Vinci robot, for example, can perform operations on prostate cancer patients with less scarring and damage faster than a surgeon and therefore get patients out of hospital sooner."

However, the expert warns that there are currently no government guidelines in place for the rapidly increasing use of robots. Professor Sharkey is also concerned about the use of robots in other walks of life, including the use of robots to look after children and the elderly. The ageing population in the West and in Japan, for example, is growing

rapidly and there are worries about how the young will be able to look after them. There is now a great deal of effort in the area of robot elderly care and robot companionship.

Professor Sharkey commented: "Much of this work is very useful in keeping old people out of care homes and hospitals for longer, but my worry is that economic consideration could see us all spending our last year socially excluded in the company of dumb machines."

Source: University of Sheffield

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