

# What is the value of a robot life?

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In the U.S. Marine corps robots are used to disarm bombs.

People are prepared to save a robot at the cost of human lives under certain conditions. One of these situations is when we believe the robot can experience pain. This has been indicated in research led by the team of Sari Nijssen of Radboud University, in collaboration with Barbara

Müller of Radboud University and Markus Paulus from LMU Munich, which will appear in *Social Cognition* on 7 February.

Robots are now indispensable in our daily lives. They perform all types of specialised, and sometimes dangerous, jobs for us. These include tasks such as detecting and dismantling mines, but robots are also used to assist in domestic affairs and healthcare. This raises interesting [questions](#), such as: how do we view these robots and how do we behave towards them?

Behavioral scientist Sari Nijssen: "It is known that [military personnel](#) may mourn a robot that is used to clear mines in the army. Funerals are organised for them. We wanted to investigate how far this empathy for robots extends, and what [moral principles](#) influence behaviour towards robots. Little research has been done in this area as of yet."

The central question of the research was the extent to which people are prepared to sacrifice robots to save human lives. The [test subjects](#) were presented with a [moral dilemma](#) and the question of whether they would sacrifice an individual to save a group of wounded people. In the different scenarios, the individual was a person, a robot with human traits, or a robot that was presented as a simple machine.

The research indicated that the more the robot was seen as human, the more difficult the dilemma was for the test subjects. When the robot was presented as a conscious being with its own thoughts, experiences, pain, and emotions, the test subjects were less likely to sacrifice the robot in favour of anonymous people. According to Nijssen, this means that people, under certain conditions, endow robots with moral value. "A human-looking [robot](#) can cause feelings and behaviours that contrast with the function for which they were developed—to help us. And the question is whether this is desirable for us."

**More information:** Sari R. R. Nijssen et al. Saving the Robot or the Human? Robots Who Feel Deserve Moral Care, *Social Cognition* (2019).  
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