Do robots and snails deserve human rights?

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

In 1999, Sony launched Aibo, a line of robotic dogs designed to provide companionship to Japanese families. It could follow its owner around the house, wag its tail and respond to commands—all without the vet bills, bathroom breaks and sneeze-inducing fur of a regular house pet. Sensors and cameras on its body allowed it to learn the layout of a home so that, over time, it could navigate rooms just like a regular pooch.

The company sold 150,000 units before production ended in 2006. Owners could still bring the dogs into Aibo for repairs, but in 2014, Aibo ceased providing maintenance altogether. Thousands of robot dogs were now doomed to, for lack of a better word, die.

What followed was a striking example of the increasingly blurred line between the robot and human worlds.

Moved by the attachment these owners had to their AI pups, one repair person began offering funeral services for retired units. Conducted in Buddhist temples and presided over by priests chanting sutras, these rituals allowed grieving owners to ceremonially mourn the loss of their companion—before it was disassembled for parts.

For Tok Thompson, associate professor of anthropology and communication and author of the book "Posthuman Folklore" (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), stories of this sort are no longer surprising. He cites another example, provided to him by Jonathan Gratch, of the USC Institute for Creative Technologies :"Roomba owners who send their unit in for repair often request the same unit back, out of a sense of attachment."

Redefining "humanity"

Emotional bonds between humans and the various forms of AI that live alongside us is increasingly the norm, and also part of the larger cultural conversation. The Sci-Fi Network show Battlestar Galactica made complicated love stories between cyborgs and humans a main plot point across its six seasons. In the 2013 movie "Her," a lonely man falls in love with an operating system. Amazon's A.I. "Alexa" is now reading bedtime stories to children. "Children very often believe that she is a real person, and develop warm personal feelings for her," says Thompson.

These blurring emotional connections are common enough that we're now grappling with the question of how we treat our robots. As we become attached to them, we also feel the need to protect them. And, as robots swiftly gain in intelligence, debate around how we even define humanity and who—or what—is subject to human rights gets increasingly complicated.

Most point to consciousness as the defining factor separating humanity from AI, which seems to lack subjective experience. However, consciousness is a murky concept. There's no agreement across intellectual disciplines for where, exactly, consciousness begins or ends. As Thompson says, "Nobody's seen it, nobody's touched it, and how is it different than the mystical concept of 'the soul'?"

If we can't even define our own consciousness clearly, how can we possibly make the decision that robots, who are rapidly developing behaviors akin to our own, aren't conscious themselves?

With this question raised, Thompson sees the opportunity for a larger change—a shift in the very definition of "humanity" and, therefore, a change in how we treat everything from operating systems to caterpillars. Because, as AI is evolving, so is our understanding of intelligence in other living things.

Wood Wide Web

The 2009 movie "Avatar" depicted a planet of life forms all bound together by a symbiotic nerve network. This actually isn't so far-fetched a concept. Earth contains its own wildlife internet, which researchers have dubbed the "wood wide web."

Studies reveal that many plants connect to each other through something called mycorrhizae, a subterranean network of roots and fungi that acts

strikingly similar to the internet.

A 1997 study showed that older trees transported carbon through this network to seedlings who live in shadier areas. In 2010, researchers at South China Agricultural University found that plants affected with blight could use the network to warn their neighbors. Organisms we once thought lived blindly for themselves may actually be enabling each other to thrive.

Of course, there's always a dark web. Orchids, for instance, use the network to cipher carbon from other plants.

Language lessons

Primate researchers recently flew a drone over a community of East African Vervet monkeys. As the device buzzed overhead, monkeys sent out warning calls using a word for "eagle" that only their Vervet cousins to the west use. Thompson feels this shows a complex use of language.

"They didn't just use their own words; they used the idea of a foreign eagle," he said.

Thompson also reminds us that, although we might pride ourselves on recent human advancements in learning dolphin language, orcas and beluga whales that were socialized with dolphins have learned to speak the language within just a few months.

Dolphins themselves are particularly striking examples of animal intelligence: They call each other by name, may speak in complete sentences and also recognize themselves in a mirror earlier then human children

Accessorized humanity

The debate on what it means to be human extends down to the microscopic level. Recent research has shown the importance to our health of a balanced gut microbiome, giving rise to grocery store refrigerators filled with products touting their probiotic contents.

Bacteria have such a significant impact on our mood and thoughts that some scientists are proclaiming the stomach "a second brain." If our perceptions and reactions to the world around us are guided by flora living in our gut, can our humanity be fully defined without them?

On the macro level, technology appears to be increasingly integrated into our humanity. Smartphones, for example, are taking the place of memory, storing knowledge that used to clutter the mind—friend's phone numbers, routes to work, upcoming appointments. A 2015 study of 6,000 Europeans showed that 91% of respondents saw their devices as an extension of their brain and 44% said they relied on them to remember information they did not.

As we grow more dependent on devices, it's possible that what we point to as being human will include an adjacent smartphone. Thompson asks, "What is it to be a bit of both, animal and computer? What is it to become, so swiftly, posthuman?"

The posthuman planet

While confusion around who or what counts as human mounts, various efforts tackle the challenge. An American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Robots has formed. Saudi Arabia granted, albeit controversially, a human-like robot with honorary citizenship. Animal rights activist groups like the Nonhuman Rights Projects fight for the

reclassification of animals like dolphins, apes and elephants to "legal persons."

For Thompson, all this debate is offering us an opportunity: "How do we fare if the category of 'we' includes life on Earth, generally?" If you look at the plastic pollution clogging our rivers, climate change melting our glaciers and overfishing decimating our oceans, one might say, "Not so well at the current moment."

Ditching superior consciousness as the litmus test for humane treatment might therefore be the best thing for the health of the planet. Personhood does not have to be a hierarchy with humans at the top, but a spectrum encompassing numerous types of consciousness—some even interconnected.

What would our world look like if we extended personhood to the planet? If we scrutinized our policies for how it impacted Earth as an entire, living, thinking organism? "Can new philosophical outlooks, such as those broached by posthumanism, provide a means of survival?" asks Thompson.

This adjustment could also be for our own, selfish good. When 5G mobile networks rev into action, machines will process stimulus in real time. Robots might then find themselves striding light years ahead of their human parents. Humans might soon appreciate a definition of personhood that's broader than just that which thinks with the most complexity.

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