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THE POLITICAL POWER OF ROBOTS. FORGETFULNESS, TRUST, CONFLICT*

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EL PODER POLÍTICO DE LOS ROBOTS. OLVIDO, CONFIANZA, CONFLICTO

Abstract
The essay describes the possible effects on human political competence of a world populated by socially autonomous machines. Forgetfulness, trust, and conflict are the main topics addressed.
Keywords
historicity; great machine; niche; work

Resumen
El ensayo describe los posibles efectos sobre la competencia política humana de un mundo poblado por máquinas sociales autónomas. El olvido, la confianza y el conflicto son los principales temas abordados.
Palabras clave
historicidad; gran máquina; nicho; obra

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Soon, there will be no identity so distinct
as simply to have none.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Passenger*

"Social" robots are becoming a presence in everyday life. They cook in restaurants, serve pizza to customers, welcome guests at hotel desks, play table tennis, and use driverless taxis to hit the roads in many towns. Quadrupedal robots scour forests and patrol the streets, while a more friendly kind of them entertain children and take care of elderly people; humanoid robots do housework, others work in Amazon warehouses and Tesla factories; some fight beside soldiers and even engage in diplomacy (Howe, 2023; Marwala, 2023).

As robots step forward in these fields, to varying degrees, we humans "pull back." For years, this has raised economic, social, and ethical questions: how it affects the industrial and "white collars" labor market (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020); how people squeezed out of wage earning could be supported (Ford, 2016); who or "what" will pay the taxes to make the state work (Aylett & Vargas, 2022), and whether it makes sense to give rules to machines (Coeckelbergh, 2022), especially those designed to kill (Arkin, 2009). The history of technology shows that innovations have sped up the manufacturing process and raised comparable social and political questions. After the launch of atomic bombs in WWII, in fact, we questioned the morality of human decision-makers; we did not assign "ethical" rules to the bomb: The bomb could not drop itself (Ceola, 2020, p. 56). Military robotics is conceptually crucial because it makes clear the difference between autonomous and non-autonomous machines: The AI-implemented robot combines the mechanical strength of its "body" and its spatiality with visual, predictive, and operational skills. These features make it into a cognitive machine that could be a good fit for surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

Sure, it still will take time for robots to get the same flexibility as humans. Perhaps they may never get it (Faggin, 2023, pp. 101–103, 127) because a wrong behaviorist and reductionist version of what thinking consists of drives technology in making machines "autonomous" (McCarthy & Hayes, 1969), whereas the mind's setting probably resembles more the flight of a flock than a calculating devise, because the "true creator is not a Turing machine" (Nicolelis, 2018, pp. 109–110). Anyway, it is right to ask questions like those, because it makes sense to link philosophy and current concerns by means of proper levels of abstraction and a sound "conceptual design" (Floridi, 2019, pp. 41–46).

In the following, I will try to evaluate how this "autonomy" could impinge on some human features like forgetfulness, trust, conflict; on this basis, I will furthermore ask what political effects are to be expected with regard to the "historicity" of human life from the spread of social robots. For "historicity," here it is meant the condition by which each person can experience something unplanned, new, uncontrolled, mysterious or, at least, surprising, at various degrees—very low or very high, it does not matter–in every moment of their life that changes, enhances or depletes their individuality.

To begin, it should not be forgotten how many modern utopias for mankind's sake precisely rely on this type of mechanical autonomy: The robot has been regarded as the best of all machines because it is able to replace us without needing us anymore. In the essay on socialism, which Wilde read in 1890 in the United States, machines and robots save man from work:

> All unintellectual labour, all monotonous, dull labour, all labour that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant conditions, must be done by machinery. Machinery must work for us in coal mines, and do all sanitary services, and be the stoker of steamers, and clean the streets, and run messages on wet days, and do anything that is tedious or distressing. At the moment, machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions, machinery will serve man. There is no doubt at all that this is the future of machinery, and just as trees grow while the country gentleman is asleep, so while Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure–which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight, machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work. The fact is, civilisation requires slaves. The Greeks were quite right there. Unless there are slaves to do the ugly, horrible, uninteresting work, culture and contemplation become almost impossible. Human slavery is wrong, insecure, and demoralising. On mechanical slavery, on the slavery of the machine, the future of the world depends. (Wilde, 2020)

Thanks to these machines, everyone will be able to concentrate on their very task, i.e., to make themselves into a work of art, according to Schiller's (1967) proposal for an aesthetic education of mankind: "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays (p. 131). It is interesting that these thoughts, stemming from the failure of the French Revolution (Schiller) and the refusal of the Victorian ethics of industry (Wilde), have been worked out in the face of a technological change that was reshaping work, society, and politics at

the same time. On the other side of the philosophical planisphere, Wilde's individualist and libertarian approach to freedom was counterpointed by Karl Marx's socialist diagnosis (Karakilic, 2020). What is similar to both versions is that the autonomous machine fosters human life, exploited first by subsistence and then by profit. Robots are political because they have to do with our freedom. This means that robotics' political relevance goes far beyond its applications; for example, it is used as a propaganda tool or in waging war. The robot that frees us from work (or mankind that frees itself, leaving it alone at work) makes it possible for us to have a time consistent with our nature and to make our freedom really effective. Robots are political because they bring out an increasing overflow of time to our benefit (Hertog et al., 2023, p. 191). Is this time really "freed" or is it still a "dependent" one, as in Hegel's slave-master dialectics (Moro, 2015, p. 538)? At the end, will we live in a great global Athens, where people do nothing but politics, since the needs of life have been met by hyper-technological slaves? However, focusing on the relationship between robot, time, and work (Ertel, 2019), one only touches the surface of the hierarchical and symbolic meaning of this question (Avent, 2018).

Making our toil more profitable has been our goal since we conjured up non-autonomous machines. The robot is not "born" in order to have another resource against the "curse" of drudgery, but becomes one. In building autonomous machines, we look primarily for something different. By them, we want to prove to ourselves that we know in what way we and the other beings are made: How animals (artificial ethology), how molecules (micro-robotics), how insects (artificial entomology), how plants (artificial botany) and above all how we are made, we, these "realms" that are believed to be the apical and most conscious intelligence. By building the robot, we say to ourselves that our basic destination is not only being freed from toil, but also enjoying the fruits of labor; moreover, we want to celebrate ourselves as the inventors of our redeemer. Robotics is to be seen as an experiment on our true being. From this perspective, it becomes a philosophical matter. A social robot, in particular, is an experiment on the features of our deep relational structures. This is why it is important to reflect upon features like forgetfulness, trust, and conflict. Vico's (998) principle, according to which "the true is precisely what is made (*verum esse ipsum factum*)" (p. 46), means that one only knows what one does, because one owns the principles of one's knowability. This old idea helps in understanding robotics as a philosophical project. Robotics as a "second time" anthropology (Richardson, 2015) seems to be an ecological design by which the artificial cognition imitates—and sometimes enhances—the natural one by potentially remaking it in all the many strategies it has taken on along the history of the planet, as it shows itself now. An "ecological" design entails that every machine operates within engineered niches—"informational

environments"—apparently like each living entity stays inside its own biological niche. By occupying a technological niche (one could say "zoe-technological") suited to it, the robot is able to cooperate with humans at an increasing rate of naturalness: The social robot's autonomy—energetic, informational, functional—aims at reinforcing this psychological outcome. This is in line with what was stated above about the metaphysical drive pushing humans to engender these machines.

The environment, such as an *Umwelt* in the sense of Uexküll's (2010) tick (pp. 45—53), provides the machine with the resources, coordinates, and information it needs to act. Such environments must also be engineered to accommodate their occupants (Dumuchel & Damiano, 2016, pp. 50–51). And a species is unaware that it occupies an environment when this works, when all goes well in it: There is no other "world" besides its own. In the case of the robot, although even the most inattentive among us will never become completely unaware that what they are dealing with is a machine, it is nevertheless likely that sometimes humans—partners of and at the same time replaced by the machine—will "forget" that they are machines.

To the extent we humans also share robots' "environments," most of which overlap, and, if those environments work well, we will eventually stop noticing them. This "forgetfulness" brings us close to the ultimate universal automatization (Mumford, 1970). The exit from this mechanical condition should be, in a word, the restart of our historicity (Scheilder, 2015). The aesthetics of robots plays a considerable role in fostering this effect, that is, nothing decorative but perhaps the most politically effective feature in all this question: pondering the look of robots from a political perspective should be the most urgent problem to focus on.

Anyway, any kind of life is more complex than that suited to an engineered environment, even that of Uexküll's tick (Vianello & Zancani, 2024; but, above all, Gembillo, 1999). When the link between autonomous machine-artificial environment seems to be an imitation of life, this happens just through forgetfulness in the human-robot relationship when this performs well (Denicolai, 1998). This is a relevant issue when it comes to keeping control of ourselves in this intercourse. In other words, we are the problem, not the robots. And here, the main issue of robots' political power comes up. Then, regarding this point too, there is a difference between a robot and a non-autonomous machine: I forget about the photocell operating the automatic gate because it is expected to activate when I come closer, but I never forget that it is an automation. I do not thank anyone when the gate opens. I do not suppose that "something" has made any effort, any more than I suppose a cloud gets tired when it melts into rain. I do not worry about it.

On the contrary, just this suspension of credulity is the most fascinating flattery their power for self-liberation gives humans. Otherwise, for what purpose would robots be autonomous? Autonomous means that something obeys its own law, which does not require something else to work. Within its own niche, the machine proves to be a robot if it is able to operate so that we "forget," even for a moment, that it is artificial. No car, no matter how much it winks its anthropomorphic headlights that look like big eyes, and drives "by itself," will make us forget that it is a cog and an electrical system. Instead, a police-dog robot does not belong to any canine species. Yet, it fosters the impression of a vitality underpinned by manifold "animal" codes of behavior, with all the uncertainties that this entails as emotional overtones, even unjustified ones. It happens because it fits into an environment. In the long run, as in the movie *Her*, we will be happy to believe that there is something spontaneous in this artifice and establish affective relationships with it.

Man as a robot maker is thus an imitator/creator, following an Aristotelian-style poietic logic. By engineering robots, humans generate their own "creatures" just like Adam "makes" Eve "from a rib" of him, i.e., by repeating what they "know" about themselves and other entities. Accustomed to robotic "environments," however, we will begin to ask again what our own "niche" is, as happened in philosophical anthropology after WWII. The problem of the time we now have ahead of us is all here: In what niche does this resulting "free" time run? Would we need to conjure up one new one? An "artificial" one for us?

Robots and Political Trust

We saw why robots enter the world not as mere machines but as ultimately almost "natural" things among us, and what role "forgetfulness" could play in it. How does politics change after they have massively shaped our everyday life? In fact, a robot politician might be attractive, because it cannot be insane and bribed. But what effect is expected on developing essential political qualities by interaction with autonomous machines? The task now will be to understand how living together with such entities could affect some human "political" endowments, above all "trust" (Vaccaro, 2020).

Notoriously, Locke (1980) attributed trust to be one of the most important political aptitudes (p. 77). If I am sick, I consent to the doctor I trust. If allowed, I would choose the teacher I rely on more for my child. I go to a swimming pool that seems more trustworthy. Trust is a form of faith—a knowing/not knowing that takes place in the balance between experience and hope. Because I got a good impression about the cleanliness of that pool, I hope that it will continue to be so when I renew my subscription for the next month, and I am renewing it precisely because experience makes me hope for it: a soft version of Hume-Russell principle integrated by a mundane use of Pascal's ethics.

Trust is a social and political "glue," with different levels of connective force (Khodyakov, 2007). For some thinkers, trust among people is fostered by institutions if these are perceived to strive for justice (Rawls, 1971); according to others, trust takes shape from the relations among selfish individuals and public organization of power (Hume, 1739). More simply, if robots operate the pool, I reasonably trust them as to the limited function they perform, that is, within the informational environment in which the entire technical and human facility is placed. However large the informational context in which any human-robot interface is set to operate, this will always be bounded, precisely because it is not like "life." This kind of "trust" does not extend beyond these boundaries and thus does not become a general positive prejudice towards anyone or anything. I would not think that the robot pool-lifeguard, so authoritative in its context, would be a candidate for directing traffic. This sort of "trust" lacks an element that always makes it into a "political" quality. The "trust" I put in his professionalism extends beyond the domain expertise and generically "charges" my doctor with positivity as an individual (Luhmann, 1968). That is, a tendency to go beyond "information environments" happens in relations between humans, even though it is probably unjustified given the available data. It is the mysterious sphere of credibility in which trust enlarges. Consent becomes credibility, which by no means rules out the risk of blundering and deception. Nevertheless, despite lots of bad experiences each of us could tell about the ungrounded trust they put in others, we still believe that some people could be beneficial even beyond their immediate competence and limited relation with us. Thus, professors, illiterates, tycoons, entertainers, astronauts, chefs, trade unionists, brothers-in-law, journalists, beaters, secret agents, actors, bankers, and wives become ministers and prime ministers "by consent." To which "informational environments" do all these people belong? None. However, what we accept with regard to humans—not understanding why and at the same time trusting them—does not seem to apply to autonomous machines: Even if I forget for a moment that it is a robot, when my robot caregiver starts talking to me about politics, it will immediately come back to me that it is one.

It is also true, on the other hand, that in a world heavily populated by robots, this very aptitude is in danger of fading. What would remain in a "hyper-historical society" (Floridi, 2014) crowded by robots is a scarce range of opportunities for personal exchange and relationships. Greetings between humans in the gym do not have enough "political" potential. Something able to enlarge trust towards credibility could develop in the "incidents" that happen in the office, in the factory, in the first aid room, at school, in the airport, while riding a bus after work or chatting with the guy at the flower stall, all places where the robot from now on will take the center of the stage. Obviously, it

is a matter of scale, but the ability to get and generate trust comes from psychological, emotional, and cognitive training, a form of soft checking others' drives, which is particularly helpful when taking part in political "decision-making." Those who grew up in small communities are aware how much this has made easier their political competence because they saw up close, in individual examples, all the main masks of social theatre, from the rich who want to rule to the poor who want to rebel, from the religious to the scientist, from the ancient resident to the immigrant, all gathered together sometimes in the same square. How can "trustworthiness" be established if the human element becomes residual in contexts where, in ancient, pre-robotic times, skills such as "mistrust," "fear," "respect," "contempt," "pride," "foresight," "thoughtfulness," "diffidence" "selfishness," and "selflessness" were learned? And if our own "niche" is exactly the "historicity," i.e., to be entangled in that kind of casual, not planned, open experiences by which individuals end up discovering something new about themselves? The main "opposition" we have to face in the robotic times seems to be between informational-artificial niche and historicity as an open, formative, experience of life, with increasingly mixed fields.

This is likely to be true for the lowest social levels. Indeed, and for the very same reason, it is to be expected that the highest social sectors will continue to employ humans for work instead of robots, not only because they cost more, but because precisely the human relationship is more training, more "political," more hierarchical, more "formative." A wealthy man would prefer to hire a good human teacher for the child rather than buy an average educational robot. Not on purpose, the robot could be among the conditions for the utopia of a stateless society; an element in the eugenetic design of a world with fewer and better humans; or more simply a way to depoliticize individuals by giving them social support in conditions of unemployment or decreasing wages, avoiding the explosive mixture that would otherwise be ignited. For example, historicity would be just this burst. Humanism, which would be the logic of historicity (Croce, 1938), could become elitist and profitable: from being a "useless" culture to a "commodity" for the few. Will dealing with robots in a large section of everyday life keep the flow of experience needed open, as a premise to be overcome, to exercise political judgement?

Robots and Political Leadership

The music majors are researching international hits using AI in order to extract their pattern and repeat this "recipe" each time in every new song. Then we will have only blockbusters. The continuous production of hits would eliminate the very possibility of any of them to become a "classic," an "evergreen," if the "green" becomes literally "ever." But if every song were a smash, in the long run, probably no one would listen to

them. Historicity pops up again. Can we try the same with politics? If we extracted the winning motifs from the rhetoric of great political leaders, would we write successful, persuasive speeches? Would we finally be able to speak to Perelman's universal audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2008)? Would an advanced AI-robot trained to imitate Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy become president of the United States? Difficult but not impossible. There is indeed a difference between international music and politics. Musical consent stays in the pleasure of listening to, of being moved by lyrics. Politics takes place in front of an audience that must be persuaded, dragged not to dance but to stand on one side against the other, with an orientation that, to be reliable, cannot wear out too quickly.

Whoever succeeds in the political action must be—or make believe to be—authoritative, individual, and direct. Now, if the robot's presence in social and economic life tarnishes the development of our political sense, is it possible for the machine to become political? Why could it not happen if politics is also an affective issue and the social robot is also an "affective" one? If we gave a machine a personal history, if this machine belonged to a common, widespread and appreciated type, recognizable as an already reassuring daily presence for many people, if it were designed on this target, if it spoke with the voice of Obama and the charisma of Reagan, in other words, if we invented an "informational political niche," who would say that it is not a politician? In our imagination, the catastrophic, post-Darwinian version still prevails, in which the robot will take on power by eliminating us for prestige or scarcity of resources. Already in the origin of his term, "robot" is a rebel machine that commits suicide (Čapek, 1921). "Robota" is the Czech literary word for the bio-mechanical serf who cannot procreate but exterminates humans in a Spartacist reaction to our supremacy. However, it is more likely that by agreement we give power to a machine, because if we do not spend our time working, if we have no humans to complain against for poor healthcare, if we have no humans to hold accountable for better teachers, better guardians of social peace, better artists, better engineers, better caregivers for the elderly and children, why should we do politics? Politics depends on conflict, another word for historicity. If every environment of the human-robot relationship is a small enclave of easy answers to useful questions and actual needs, where should the need for politics come from?

Furthermore, little political strength is left to those living with a robotic creed. I do indeed influence if I can boycott. However, it is difficult to boycott if I find a robot everywhere I turn. The end of work is the end of low power, because the struggle for power needs constant, minimal episodes of hurting: At the hotel reception behind the politeness I have to see the tiredness; on the teacher's face I sometimes read the signs of

the hours spent with the children; the nervousness of the human caregiver who looks after me tells me something political; the illegitimate violence of the security officer suggests what dark, inevitable whirlpool brings violence and protection together. Without the impact of the negative, I no longer need, or even want, to engage in politics, because I no longer see a need for change. At that point, if the war were waged among machines, the less important role of taking political decisions could go, democratically, by popular choice (so to speak) to a robot that has learned in its relationship with us what we have forgotten in our relationship with it.

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