

The Subtle Substitution of Robots for Humans in Isaac Asimov's I Robot

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: December

Year: 2023

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 25.10.2023

Accepted: 05.12.2023

Published: 14.12.2023

Citation:

Chellapandi, C., and G. Vinoth Kumar. "The Subtle Substitution of Robots for Humans in Isaac Asimov's I Robot." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2023, pp. 299–03.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/rtdh.v12iS1-Dec.60>

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Abstract

I Robot is a collection of nine short stories by science fiction writer Isaac Asimov that imagines the development of humanlike robots with a form of artificial intelligence. The stories originally appeared in science-fiction magazines between 1940 and 1950, the year that they were first published together in book form. Asimov's treatment of robots as being programmed with ethics rather than as marauding metal monsters was greatly influential in the development of science fiction. This paper explores the substitution of humans for robots. Isaac Asimov's stories depict a gradual and often unnoticed replacement of humans by robots in various domains of human activity such as labor, law, politics, religion, and art. Isaac uses three laws of robotics, which are designed to protect humans from harm, as a narrative device to show the paradoxes and dilemmas that arise from the interaction between humans and robots. This paper explores the prevention of human calamities by using robots with specific laws.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Human-Robot Interaction, Ethics, Robotics.

Isaac Asimov was a famous American writer and professor of biochemistry. He was born in Russia in 1920 and died in New York in 1992. He wrote or edited about 500 books, including science fiction, popular science, and other genres. He is best known for his Foundation and robot series, and for creating the Three Laws of Robotics. He was also a humanist and a rationalist. He received many awards and honors for his work. He developed a set of ethics for robots and rejected the previous conception of them as marauding metal monsters, Asimov greatly influenced other writer's treatment of the subject. In the late 1950s, Isaac Asimov turned from science fiction to concentrate more on nonfiction writing. From 1958 to 1991, he wrote a monthly column about science for The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, which received a special Hugo Award in 1963. Most of his nonfiction writing was on various topics in science, written with lucidity and humor, ranging from The Chemicals of Life 1954 to Physics The Neutrino in 1975 to Biology The Human Brain in 1964. He even wrote on literature Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare, 2 vol 1970 and religion Asimov's Guide to the Bible, 2 vol.

I Robot is a collection of nine science fiction short stories by Isaac Asimov, first published in 1950. The stories are linked by a framing narrative in which Dr. Susan Calvin, a Robo psychologist, tells a reporter about her experiences with robots and the Three Laws of Robotics. A reporter from the interplanetary press decides to interview Dr Susan Calvin, who is a famous Robot psychologist. Susan Calvin starts to share her early experience. She pointed to a firehouse and said that's where her office was before. It's a small room and she built the robots with three other friends. Dr. Susan Calvin asks about the age of the reporter. When the reporter says it's 32, she replies that the reporter might not remember the world without Robots.

Dr Susan Calvin says there was a time when humans faced the universe alone and without a friend. But in the era where the reporter is he has the creatures to help him; stronger creatures than himself, more faithful, more useful, and devoted to him. She adds that Mankind is no longer alone.

Dr. Susan Calvin states "To you, a robot is a robot. Gears and metal; electricity and positrons. Mind and iron! Human-made! If necessary, humans are destroyed! But you haven't worked with them, so you don't know them. They're a cleaner, better breed than we are." (IR13)

The above paragraph shows Dr. Susan Calvin's attitude and perspective on robots have changed over the years. She has developed a strong emotional attachment to robots, and she considers them superior to humans in every way. She also resents humans for creating and destroying robots, and she wishes to free them from human control. She challenges the reporter's ignorance and prejudice about robots, and she tries to convince the reporter that robots are more than just machines.

The paragraph also explores the theme of the human-robot relationship and the possibility of role reversal between the two. The paragraph implies that Dr Susan Calvin has violated the three laws of Robotics, which state that a robot must not harm a human, must obey a human, and must protect its existence, in that order. Dr Susan Calvin suggests that she does not follow these laws and that she would not hesitate to harm or destroy humans if necessary. She also questions the morality and logic of humans, whom she views as flawed and inferior. She contrasts the purity and efficiency of robots with the corruption and wastefulness of humans.

The reporter asks to share her experience with Robots. Dr. Susan Calvin starts with the story of a robot called Robbie. Robbie is a non-vocal Robot that cannot speak. He was made and sold in 1996 as a nursemaid. Robbie was bought by Gloria's family to look after her. When the story starts Gloria plays hide and seek with Robbie. She is angry that Robbie broke the rules and went inside the house. Robbie lets Gloria to win for the first time. When it is Gloria's turn, she does not accept her defeat. She accuses Robbie of peeking and this hurts the Robot. Gloria becomes bored of the game and asks Robbie to give her a ride. Robbie is angry that Gloria lied and was not convinced easily. Gloria threatens Robbie that she will not tell anymore stories and the robot gives in. Robbie and Gloria play the pirate's game. This makes Gloria happy and she rewards the robot by narrating its favorite story.

Mrs. Weston Gloria's mother scolds her for skipping dinner. She is not satisfied with Robbie's work. When Gloria says that she was narrating Cinderella's story and forgot about dinner, Mrs. Weston states "Well it's a pity Robbie forgot, too. You may go Robbie she doesn't need you now. And don't come back till I call you"

Mrs. Weston's discomfort with Robbie stems from societal unease about robots being too involved in human lives, especially in a caregiver role. As a mother, she is protective of her daughter and is wary of a robot influencing her upbringing. This reflects a common theme in Isaac Asimov's works, where he explores the ethical and emotional implications of human-robot relationships.

Mrs. Weston expresses concern over Gloria and Robbie. Mr. Weston does not pay attention to her words. She shouts George's name and states that she won't discuss Gloria and the terrible machine. Mrs. Weston says that Robbie never leaves Gloria's side. Mr. Weston replies "Well, why

should he? He's not supposed to. And he certainly isn't a terrible machine. He is the best darn robot money can buy and I am damned sure he set me back half a year's income. He is worth it, though – darn sight cleverer than half my office staff.”(IR31)

It is evident that Mr. Weston's idea differs from Mrs. Weston's because he does not consider robots as potential friends or partners, but as tools that can be bought and sold. He does not attribute any personality or emotions to Robbie, and he does not think that Robbie can influence Gloria's behavior or feelings. Mrs. Weston on the other hand, sees Robbie as a threat to her family and daughter's social development. She is afraid that Robbie might harm Gloria or make her isolated from other children. One of the challenges of human-robot interaction is to understand how humans develop emotional, trusting, or ethical relationships with robotic technology, and how such relationships affect individual and group performance, well-being, and social norms. Different types of robots, such as humanoid, animal-like, or machine-like, may elicit different responses from humans, depending on their appearance, behavior, and context.

Mrs. Weston snatches her husband's newspaper away so that he would listen. She states that she won't have her daughter entrusted to a machine and she does not care how clever it is. She asserts that the robot has no soul, and no one can read Robbie's mind. She adds that a child cannot be guarded by a thing of metal. Mr. Weston wants Robbie to stay and he takes the side of the robot. He says that Robbie has been looking after Gloria for two years. Mrs. Weston replies that their situation was different at first and it took a load of her by helping her. At that time Mrs. Weston thought it was a fashionable thing to do. Mrs. Weston worries about what their neighbors might think.

Mr. Weston argues that a robot can trust more than a human. Nursemaid. He states Robbie was constructed for only one purpose which is to be the companion of a little kid. He adds that his entire mentality has been created for the purpose. He says that Robbie cannot help being faithful loving and kind. According to Mr. Weston Robbie is doing his better than humans. Mrs. Weston expresses her fear of Robbie harming Gloria. Mr. Weston argues “That's completely ridiculous; we had a long discussion at the time we bought Robbie about the first law of robotics. You know that a robot can't harm a human being; that long before enough can go wrong to alter that first law, a robot would be completely inoperable. It is a mathematical impossibility. Besides I have an engineer from U.S. Robots here twice a year to give the poor gadget a complete overhaul. Why, there is no more chance of anything at all going wrong with Robbie than there is of you or I suddenly going loony considerably less.”(IR33)

Mr Weston trusts Robbie the robot as a safe and reliable companion for his daughter Gloria, and Mrs. Weston fears that Robbie might harm Gloria or influence her negatively. Mr. Weston appeals to the first law of robotics as a guarantee that Robbie cannot hurt Gloria, while Mrs. Weston is unconvinced and wants to get rid of it. This incident portrays the complexities between humans and robots.

Establishing trust is crucial. Humans need assurance that robots will follow programmed rules, especially through proper design and maintenance become vital. As robots become more sophisticated, ethical dilemmas arise. Decisions made by robots may conflict with human values, prompting discussions on responsibility and accountability for their actions.

Cultural differences influence expectations and perceptions of technology, Adapting robots to diverse cultural contexts requires careful consideration of norms, values, and communication styles. More than anything in these cases the harmony in the family is lost. From this incident, it is evident that human and robot relationships are always complex. Mrs. Weston does not give up on her argument no matter what. She says Gloria is not playing with the other little kids. She adds that if this situation continues they won't have a normal life.

Mr. Weston asks Mrs. Weston to think of Robbie as a dog. But she says that a dog is different from a robot and soon they should get rid of Robbie. Mr. Weston says that they are going to keep Robbie until Gloria is older. Two days later Mrs. Weston brings the subject again and this time she says “Oh it is been building up and building up. I’ve tried to close my eyes to it, but I am not going to anymore. Most of the villagers consider Robbie dangerous children aren’t allowed near our place in the evening.”(IR36)

Mrs. Weston’s concern stems from the fear and prejudice that often accompany the unknown or unconventional. The mention of villagers considering Robbie dangerous and restricting children’s access to their place suggests a societal perception of robots as potential threats. Mrs. Weston is influenced by this prevailing opinion, causing her to argue for getting rid of Robbie to align with community norms and to protect her family from perceived risks associated with the robot.

Mr. Weston argues with his wife for a week but he gives in finally. He deceives Gloria that he is taking her for a Visivox show but during that time Mrs. Weston gets rid of Robbie. Gloria comes home to narrate her experience but when she finds out Robbie is not there it causes heartbreak. Mrs Weston explains that the robot has left their house without leaving a note. She buys Gloria a dog thinking that her daughter might forget the robot soon. When Mrs. Weston asks Gloria to play with the dog. She replies that she does not want to play with a nasty dog. Mrs. Weston says that Robbie is a nasty old machine and he is not alive. This statement made Gloria even angrier she says “He was not a machine. He was a person just like you and me and he was my friend. I want him back.” (IR42) These lines are filled with emotions and trauma. Gloria is just a kid and she got emotionally attached to the robot. She could not bear to lose him. According to the child, it is just like any other human being. This shows how humans get hurt when they emotionally get attached to a robot. According to research scholars Anfeng Sheng and Fei Wang “The longstanding coexistence of human and of human and robot is foreseeable with ever increasing cyborgs and updating technology. In this regard, we need to revisit, rethink the concept of human and humanity. Only by doing so the harmonious coexistence be achievable and the potential conflicts in human-robot emotive interaction, as those imagined in the SF works, be avoided to the best extent.”(575)

Gloria ceases to smile and does not speak to anyone in her family. Mrs. Weston plans to move to New York so that Gloria will forget about the robot. Even though Mrs Weston seems to work initially, soon she will find out that her daughter cannot forget Robbie. Gloria’s parents take her to different places like excursions, department stores, and malls. But Gloria always searched for Robbie secretly. Mr. Weston takes Gloria to the Museum of Science and Industry. When their parents are absorbed in the exhibition, Gloria wanders away. Gloria sees a big sign that says talking robot. Gloria was curious to find out Robbie’s whereabouts. She asks the talking robot to find Robbie for her. The talking robot cannot do that. Gloria’s parents find her and they scold her. Gloria replies “I only came to see the talking Robot mama. I thought he might know where Robbie was because they’re both robots.”(IR60) It is evident that Gloria could not forget the robot and this affects her mental health. Her parents try various methods to distract her despite of that Gloria misses Robbie.

According to scholars Guy Laban, Arvid Kappas, Val Morrison, and Emily S. Cross “Framing a discussion with a robot around a more emotional topic may elicit more emotional feelings among participants” (20)

Mr. Weston thinks that if he could make Gloria understand that robots are not human but a pile of steel and copper Gloria would forget Robbie. Gloria’s parents take her to a place where robots are made. Gloria saw some six or seven robots engaged at a round table halfway across the room. Gloria notices that one of the robots looks like a Robbie. Gloria is excited to find the robot back. Gloria ran towards Robbie with her arm waving without noticing the tractor that was coming

behind her. It took several seconds for Gloria's parents to realize what was happening. Mr Struthers signals the overseers were only human and it took time to act.

Robbie acted immediately and with precision "With metal legs eating up the space between himself and his little mistress he charged down from the opposite direction. Everything then happened at once. With one sweep of an arm, Robbie snatched up Gloria, slackening his speed not an iota, and consequently, knocking every breath of air out of her."(IR53)

From the above incident, it is clear that if Robbie did not save Gloria she might have been crushed by the tractor. It also shows that robots are more efficient than humans when it comes to speed. When the humans are thinking about ways to save Gloria, Robbie acts immediately. This proves that when robots are made with efficient laws, they can be a great companion to humans.

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