

Editorial

Contemporary Robotics in Relation to the Editor in Chief's Tasks

For most of the last 40 years with one international journal and 28 years with another as Editor in Chief I had managed to do without robots. But at the present time my life is complicated by online robots called Editorial Managers that now control much of my editorial life. These "managers" are designed, one supposes, to make my life as an Editor in Chief, easier than it has been. And there is no doubt that the organizational structure that is the basis of these, namely the retention of those articles that are uploaded and the relation with the emails of the author or authors and the comments of referees all in one handy place on line are also very helpful.

Of course an editorial assistant used to look after those things for an Editor in Chief and also organized the gathering once a month of the editorial board, where all the new articles that had arrived with the month were distributed among board members. This required usually a photocopier and a series of file folders for each incoming article that wanted to be published in the journal in question.

Communication with an editorial assistant was also very easy. Usually such an assistant had an office or at least a desk in close proximity to the Editor in Chief, was paid a manageable sum for the work done out of the incoming revenue of the journal in question, and who did the daily tasks necessary. These were such tasks as noting that an article had arrived, writing back on behalf of the Editor to the hopeful author saying we had received the article, perhaps writing off to a couple of plausible referees without asking, or if necessary talking with Editor about who might plausibly look at the article, or as to whom it might be delegated on the Editorial Board to meet in the upcoming month. It was lovely to have an intelligent and helpful human being sorting those things out for the Editor her or himself. Indeed for one of the journals I presently edit, that is a wonderful continuing relationship.

In recent days I have suffered at the hands of the other extra tasks that have been programmed into the other journal's Editorial Managers that now are nominally in my service, though indeed my authors, my assistant and I are really in the service of these clever

robots. One of those tasks is to see that I do not accept any article for which at least two recommendations for or against publication have been received. And another of those tasks is to see that nothing is accepted by the Editor that has been suspected of being produced by another robot that actually writes the article on behalf of a human being or perhaps is the result of the purchase of a suitable article for publication from a so-called Publication Mill that produces such articles for sale to willing buyers.

Such possibilities that my own editorial robot, the Editorial Manager, is apparently able now to detect (while showing the Editor's incompetence at either not being able to count up to two or to detect the obvious signs of Robotic assisted writing or Robotic purchased writing) is now communicated to someone with a grander title in the publishing house hierarchy in a commercial organization such as the publishing house that "owns" the journal in question. It is this person's duty, in these days of Robotic epistemology and quasi-omniscience, to communicate in a well mannered fashion to the apparently ignorant Editor in Chief of these recent possible faults of possible commission or omission. In my own case, especially during the central era of COVID 19 and its aftermath, this has meant a number of such raps on the knuckles for my own lack of editorial judgement or editorial understanding of the insufficient referee related or authorial possibilities or circumstances. These raps on the knuckles are on behalf of the robotic Editorial Manager but delivered by human beings under the robot's sway.

Because I consider myself an Oxford educated philosopher who has been affected by the excellent philosophical work of such splendid former Editors of the British philosophy journal *Mind* as G.E. Moore at Cambridge and Gilbert Ryle at Oxford, I have tended to use their work and that journal as my model. In general over the last 40 years as I worked on my editorial tasks with the journal whose Editorial Manager has taken me to task from time to time, I have considered it my duty to try to get two or more reviewers for each article before I made my judgment as to the publication of the article in question. On the other hand, as the practice of both Moore and Ryle showed me, it is not always possible to do that and the editor has to use her or his own judgment on each and every article that comes in, especially when no reviews are easily forthcoming. The period of Covid publishing that we have recently come through has been a period with enormous increases in articles arriving at some journals to be judged and a corresponding unwillingness of

referees to take on the task of reading and commenting on the articles we have sent out to them. That puts an Editor in a dilemma.

On the one hand an Editor wishes to give every article that is obviously worthy of being potentially published a chance at intelligent reviews. On the other hand, if an article is obviously good and no reviews are forthcoming an editor should be unafraid to publish it anyway. The most famous example of such a case is that of Bertrand Russell's article sent to Mind in 1905 called "On Denoting", certainly the most read and commented article in philosophy in the English language that I know of in 20th and 21st century philosophy. The then editor, James Ward, had trouble getting any intelligent commentary on such a brief and revolutionary piece of writing. So he decided to judge it and publish it himself. From this decision generations of philosophers with an interest in logic and epistemology have benefitted. And I have occasionally had to do much the same thing. Only now when I do my Robotic master will complain to those who are administrators but not editors, but not directly to me.

This strikes me as a point at which an Editor must follow the earlier considerations of Isaac Asimov, a well-known science fiction author who saw the future and published in 1942 the Three Laws of Robotics in a short story. These laws were as follows:

- First, "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm".
- Second, "A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law".
- Third: "A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law".

These suggested laws have held up pretty well. But the examples of my Editorial activities coming into conflict with the judgments of the robot Editorial Manager and its reporting first to the hierarchy of the company that owns the journal in question does suggest that the story is a little more complex. In this case the laws may well be functioning as rather the following three:

- First(beta): A robot may not injure a corporate person or through inaction allow a corporate person to come to harm.
- Second(beta) A robot must obey orders given to it by or on behalf of a corporate person that employs or controls the robot except where such order might conflict with the First(beta) Law.
- Third(B): A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First (beta) or Second(beta) Law.

And the central question becomes whether or not “human being” or “corporate person” has primacy in the laws governing robots. And closely connected to that is whether or not an individual or a whole class or robots might have to be considered a person.

Among the examples with which I began is that the Editorial Assistant function is now heavily in the hands of the robotic Editorial Manager, and the dominant partner is this robot, not the human being. Indeed, one might say that the former editorial tasks of the Editorial Assistant have largely been replaced by the robot. In that sense the robot is taking away a human job.

Robots can and do take human jobs thereby putting human out of work. Indeed this has been what our mechanical and electrical devices have been doing since the Industrial Revolution.

And robots apparently are now capable of helping some humans cheat their way through school and university, ChatGPT being the most recent prominent example. Furthermore in many respects robots can be developed that have capabilities beyond that of any human, especially with respect to the retention of data and its use or the rapid identification of things. One example with respect to human activities is that of being a contestant on the television program Jeopardy where IBM’s Watson was successful in defeating the cleverest of humans at the task of answering trivial questions of great obscurity in a given the answer determine the question format due to the extensive data bank posse by Watson for that purpose. A serious consideration of this new development, though now one that is upon us, will have to be part of another Editorial from me. I will try to work on developing a few more laws of robotics that will be as helpful as Isaac Asimov’s have been up to now.

Dr. Ian Winchester
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