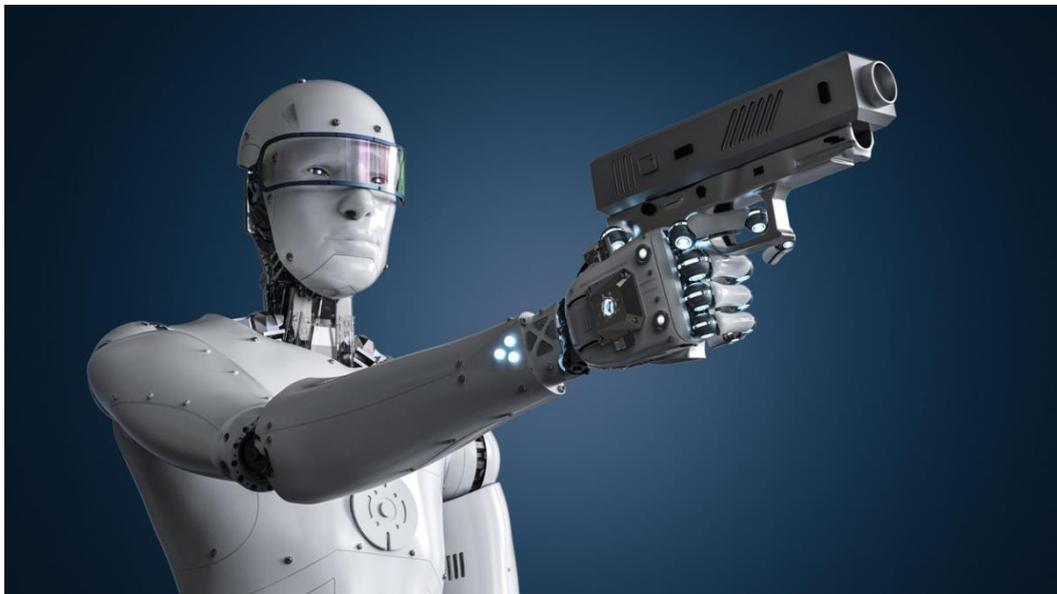


## LIVING AMONG ROBOTS

Brigitte Battat

*In 1664, Isaac Newton, philosopher, mathematician, and physicist, wrote, Plato is my friend, Aristotle is my friend, but my best friend is truth.*

In 2023, humanity is flooded with apps, and has been recently sanctified with new algorithmic creations, **OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google's Bard and Microsoft's Sydney**. At the World Government Summit in Dubai, Elon Musk said, *"I think it's actually a bigger risk to society than cars and planes"*. He added that while cars, planes, and medicine must comply with legal safety standards, AI still lacks rules and regulations to govern its development.



The concept of robotics started in 1942, when the scientist / science fiction writer Isaac Asimov coined the term the Three Laws of Robotics, which provide a moral code to keep machines in check. The three laws of robotics are:

1. A robot may not injure a human being, or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the first law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first and the second law.

That sounds logical. However, the three laws may not provide a basis to work from to develop moral robots: not all human beings involved in the production

of robots are moral. Slaughterbots, also called ‘lethal autonomous weapons systems’ or ‘killer robots’, are weapons that use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify, select, and kill human targets without human intervention. Though these weapons sound futuristic, reports of their use are starting to mount up. **Algorithms are incapable of comprehending the value of human life, and so should never be empowered to decide who lives and who dies.**



In 2014, **Nick Bostrom**, Director, Future of Humanity Institute Professor, Faculty of Philosophy & Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford, wrote a book entitled **SUPERINTELLIGENCE: Paths, Dangers, Strategies**. I will provide a paragraph that resonates with my views on the topic of robotics and superintelligence:

*Before the prospect of an intelligence explosion, we humans are like small children playing with a bomb. Such is the mismatch between the power of our plaything and the immaturity of our conduct. Superintelligence is a challenge for which we are not ready now and will not be ready for a long time. We have little idea when the detonation will occur, though if we hold the device to our ear, we can hear a faint ticking sound.*

The preface to Professor Bostrom’s book is a fable that epitomizes the uncertain fate of humanity in a world dominated by robotics.

*“It was the nest-building season, but after days of long hard work, the sparrows sat in the evening glow, relaxing and chirping away. “We are all so small and weak. Imagine how easy life would be if we had an owl who could help us build our nests!” “Yes!” said another. “And we could use it to look after our elderly and our young.” “It could give us advice*

*and keep an eye out for the neighborhood cat,” added a third. Then Pastus, the elder bird, spoke: “Let us send out scouts in all directions and try to find an abandoned owlet somewhere, or maybe an egg. A crow chick might also do, or a baby weasel. This could be the best thing that ever happened to us, at least since the opening of the Pavilion of Unlimited Grain in yonder backyard.” The flock was exhilarated, and sparrows everywhere started chirping at the top of their lungs. Only Scronkfinkle, a one-eyed sparrow with a fretful temperament, was unconvinced of the wisdom of the endeavor. Quoth he: “This will surely be our undoing. Should we not give some thought to the art of owl-domestication and owl-taming first, before we bring such a creature into our midst?” Replied Pastus: “Taming an owl sounds like an exceedingly difficult thing to do. It will be difficult enough to find an owl egg. So let us start there. After we have succeeded in raising an owl, then we can think about taking on this other challenge.” “There is a flaw in that plan!” squeaked Scronkfinkle; but his protests were in vain as the flock had already lifted off to start implementing the directives set out by Pastus. Just two or three sparrows remained behind. Together they began to try to work out how owls might be tamed or domesticated. They soon realized that Pastus had been right: this was an exceedingly difficult challenge, especially in the absence of an actual owl to practice on.*

*Nevertheless, they pressed on as best they could, constantly fearing that the flock might return with an owl egg before a solution to the control problem had been found. **It is not known how the story ends.**”*

In response to Nick Bostrom’s fable, in 2017, Geopoliticraticus Word Press magazine published an article that provided a conclusion to Professor Bostrom’s fable:

*“When the other sparrows returned with the enormous egg of a tawny owl, many times the size of a sparrow egg, the owl tamers were confident in their plan, and the returning sparrows with their owl egg rejoiced to know that the most advanced owl researchers had settled upon a plan that they were sure would work to the benefit of all sparrows.*

*The owlet grew, though it grew slowly, and certainly was not the most impressive specimen of a tawny owl, fed as it was on small seeds and small insects that were scarcely enough to satisfy its hunger.*

*The plan appeared to exceed all expectations, and the owlet counted himself one of the flock of sparrows, never questioning his place among*

*the sparrows, and already beginning to use his growing strength to aid his “fellow” sparrows. Until one day. The sparrows were together in a large flock looking for seeds when an enormous adult tawny owl suddenly descended upon them.*

*The large owl said to the little owlet, “I will show you your true nature,” so he picked up the owlet carefully but firmly in his powerful beak and flew the little owlet to a branch that hung low over a still pond. Soon the large owl returned, and he held in his claws a freshly killed bird, about the size of a sparrow (he had spared the owlet the agony of beginning with a sparrow). The little owlet felt sick to his stomach. He said to the big owl, “I’m hungry and I would like some seeds and insects please.” The large owl looked at him disdainfully. He held the dead bird down with one talon and ripped the body open with his beak. “This is owl food!” he said to the owlet as he gulped down a chunk of fresh meat. The big owl tears off another chunk of meat and says to the owlet, “Open your beak!” The little owlet shakes his head from side to side (finding that he can almost rotate his head all the way around when he does so) and tries to flatten himself against the wall of the tree behind him.*

*“No, I want to eat seeds,” says the little owlet. The large owl will have none of it, and he forces the chunk of fresh meat down the maw of the little owl, who gags on the bloody feast (**as all gag upon attempting to swallow an unwelcome truth**) but eventually chokes it down. Gagging and frightened, the little owlet slowly begins to understand that he has now, for the first time in his life, encountered his true food, the food of owls, the only food that can nourish him and sustain him as an owl. For he has seen himself in the still water of the pond, and now knows himself to be an owl.”*

“*The Rape of the Mind*” explores the psychology of thought control, menticide, and brainwashing. Published in 1956 and written by Joost A. M. Meerloo (M.D., Instructor in Psychiatry, Columbia University Lecturer in Social Psychology, New School for Social Research, Former Chief, Psychological Department, Netherlands Forces), the book analyzes processes that have the potential to manipulate human minds and influence human behavior.

Professor Meerloo emphasizes the fact that as in all mass media, one should be aware of the hypnotizing, seductive action of any all-penetrating form of communication. People become fascinated with subjects and images even when they do not wish to look on. Professor Meerloo stresses the fact that **every step in personal growth needs isolation, needs inner conversation and deliberation and a reviewing with the self**. As an example, television

hampers such processes and prepares the mind for molding / collectivization and cliché thinking. Eventually, it persuades the onlookers to think in terms of mass values, it intrudes into family life, and it eventually cuts off the more subtle interfamilial communication.

Professor Meerloo summarizes the impact of technology on the human mind, as follows:

*The world of tomorrow will witness a tremendous battle between technology and psychology. It will be a fight of technology versus nature, of systematic conditioning versus creative spontaneity. The veneration of the machine implies the turning of mechanical knowledge into power, into push-button power. Mechanical instruments of destruction such as the H-bomb have translated the primitive human urge for destruction into large-scale scientific killing. Now, this destructive potential may become an easy tool for any potentate crazy for power.*

*Driven by technology, our own world has become more interdependent, and through our dependence on technical knowledge and devices, we ourselves are in danger of delivering our people to the more brutal totalitarians. This is the actual dilemma of our civilization. The machine that became a tool of human organization and made possible the conquest of nature, has acquired a dictatorial position. It has forced people into automatic responses, into rigid patterns and destructive habits.*

*The machine has aroused an ever-increasing yearning for speed, for frenzied accomplishments. There exists a psychological relationship between speedomania (frenzied swiftness) and ruthlessness. Behind the wheel in a fast car, a driver becomes drunk with power. Here again we see the denial of the concept of natural, steady growth. Ideas and methods need time to mature. The machine forces results prematurely: evolution is turned into revolution of wheels.*

*The machine is the denial that progress has to grow within us before it can be realized outside ourselves. Mechanization takes away the belief in mental struggle, the belief that problem-solving needs time and repeated attempts. Without such beliefs, the platitude will take over the world.*

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