ECAP10

VIII European Conference on Computing and Philosophy

General Editor: Klaus Mainzer

The interdisciplinary conference ECAP10 is devoted to the foundations and limits of man-machine interaction. Our thoughts and actions, our perception, imagination, and experience depend more and more on informational, computational, and robotic systems with increasing complexity and autonomy. What are their epistemic, ethical, and societal challenges for the future of mankind? ECAP10 will promote scholarly dialogues on all aspects of this computational & informational turn of society and the use of computers and robots in the service of philosophy.

ECAP10 is the eighth conference in the annual series. From Monday 4th to Wednesday 6th October, 2010 the European Conference on COMPUTING AND PHILOSOPHY (ECAP10) will be held at the TUM - Technische Universität München. ECAP is the European conference on Computing and Philosophy, the European affiliate of the International Association for Computing and Philosophy (IACAP).

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You, robot

Ontology, appearance, and the linguistic construction of robots and human-robot relations

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Extended Abstract

Although most us think of robots as 'mere machines', empirical research shows that we sometimes treat them as if they were more than objects. We respond to them with far more affection or even unease (Mori, 1970) than one would expect. Some robots become 'social robots' or artificial companions (Breazeal, 2003; Turkle, 2006; Dautenhahn, 2005, 2007). How can we make sense of this paradox from a philosophical point of view?

Traditional Western ontologies, with their strict subject-object distinctions, their belief in intrinsic properties, and their objectivist approach, are not very helpful for understanding what goes on here. What we need instead is a social-relational and phenomenological approach to ontological status, which shows how robots can appear to us as 'quasi-others' (Ihde, 1990) within quasi-social relations. The 'machine' appearance is only one possible interpretation: the robot can have different meanings and there is 'gestalt switching' between them.

Responding to work by Ihde, Searle, and Turkle (Ihde, 1990; Searle, 1980, 1995; Turkle, 1984, Turkle et al 2006), this paper argues that the relation between subject and (more-than-) object is mediated by language. It proposes a 'linguistic turn' in philosophy of robotics that changes the focus from what robots 'are' to how robots appear to us, and from questions about what the robot can say (philosophy of early AI, e.g. Turing, 1950) to what humans say (philosophy of contemporary social robotics).

It is shown that the words we use do not only represent robots and human-robot relations but also interpret them and even construct them. This view enables us to attend to shifts in talking about robots to talking to robots as interpretations and constructions of human-robot relations. In linguistic terms, we can observe shifts from the impersonal third-person pronoun "it" to the personal second-person "you" and sometimes even the first-person plural "we".

This makes sense of what goes on between humans and robots by revealing at least two different modes of relating to robots, which are both linguistically mediated: an 'objective' one and a 'quasi-social' one. Neither of these modes or repertoires has ontological priority.

Although more work is needed to explore its full scope and implications, this approach can contribute to a richer understanding of how we relate to robots and to other entities.

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