

# Robot discourse: tik- tok as a response to i, robot



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In publishing *I, Robot*, Isaac Asimov inadvertently defined — and arguably, had a very large hand in creating — the science fiction subgenre of robot and/or artificial intelligence science fiction. In doing so, Asimov also gave voice to rising anxiety about the danger of future technology, especially sentient technology. However, despite the tension in *I, Robot*, Asimov presents a fairly optimistic and benevolent view of what robot servitude would eventually look like. The robots Asimov places in his narrative are eager to serve humans, or in the very least are obedient and excel in the tasks they were created to do. Although sentient, there is no exploration of robot “personhood” — when a robot’s motivations must be understood, they are parsed out by a human. Instead, Asimov offers his reader a peak into a future where humans have complete control over the technology that they use to better mankind (and when that control is disrupted, that is when there is anxiety and tension).

This future is reliant on the three laws of robotics that Asimov created, which places human safety above all, but also hardwires robots to protect themselves — or rather, to protect the investment humans have made with them, both intellectually and monetarily. It is how humanity controls the robots that work beneath them and why humanity feels so at ease working with and having robots work for them. Published in 1983, *Tik-Tok* by John Sladek is, at its core, a response to Asimov’s optimistic future. In his novel, Sladek offers the reader a grittier look at what the universe Asimov created could be — and what the possible repercussions of robot servitude could have not only for the robots themselves, but for the morality of humanity as a whole.

The very first story that is told in *I, Robot* is the story of the nanny robot Robbie. He is beloved by his charge, but the mother and the townspeople remain suspicious of Robbie simply because he is a robot. Mrs. Weston, as she is referred to in the story, treats Robbie like an object – ordering him to leave once his duties are finished and not to appear again until ordered too. She tells her husband that she doesn't care “how clever it is” and that because “it has no soul ... no one knows what it may be thinking” (Asimov 7). She expresses concern about what the neighbors think and eventually, that is what ultimately drives the family to rid themselves of Robbie. In the end, however, Robbie is placed back with the Westons and Mrs. Weston concedes that perhaps Robbie is the best babysitter for her daughter – at the moment. In *Tik-Tok*, there are similar instances of robot discrimination, but Sladek offers up no happy ending for them.

In the very first chapter, *Tik-Tok* recounts an instance wherein a police officer arrives at the house wherein said police officer does not refer to *Tik-Tok* by name – only by the insulting nickname *Rusty*. And although *Tik-Tok* is clearly sentient, the police officer wants to speak to his owners rather than *Tik-Tok*. The police officer asks “your people home, *Rusty*?” reminding *Tik-Tok* not only that he has no bodily autonomy, but that he is owned by someone – the use of *Rusty* reminds *Tik-Tok* that he is thought of as property simply because he is a robot (Sladek 10). The entire question and the casualness in which it was asked, speaks to the idea that this sort of interaction and attitude is common place. When *Tik-Tok* tells the officer that his people are not home, the officer deigns to speak with the robot. The officer is investigating the murder of a little blind girl and after roughly checking the

so-called Asimov circuits implanted into every robot, which in theory does not allow a robot to harm, or allow harm to come by, another human – he is convinced of Tik-Tok’s innocence. This scene represents not only the idea of the new social classes introduced with the creation of the robot (i. e. the robot is the property of another person and any human is above the robot – which is why the police officer was able to probe Tik-Tok’s circuits and motor functions), but also the reliance of the Asimov circuits in the society that Sladek created in Tik-Tok.

After the police officer leaves, Tik-Tok recounts what the Asimov circuits are and why they are called so:

There was some improvement when the so-called “ asimov” circuits were introduced. They were named after a science fiction writer of the last century, who postulated three laws for the behavior of his fictional robots. A robot was not allowed to injure any human. It had to obey all human orders, except the order to injure any human. It had to protect its own existence, unless that meant disobeying an order or injuring any human (Sladek 11).

This scene supports the idea that the entirety of Tik-Tok was created as a response to Asimov’s idealistic robotic future. Not only does Sladek use Asimov’s three laws, but Sladek actually makes reference to Asimov by name and places him in his universe as a science fiction writer. By placing Asimov in Tik-Tok, Sladek differentiates between the idealistic fictional world of Asimov – and the grittier, terrible ‘ reality’ of Tik-Tok. It seems Sladek purposefully wanted the reader to understand that while Asimov’s contributions to science fiction were undeniable, if his robotic future came

into existence as it had in Tik-Tok, it would not be as optimistic and benevolent as Asimov had written. Sladek also makes a point to discuss how if sentient robots came into existence and Asimov's three laws were employed – they would be useless, as the parameters of his laws were too vague. What constitutes as harm to humans or to oneself? How can those three be programmed into a sentient being? Tik-Tok asks these questions and comes to the conclusion that the Asimov circuits are implanted into robots for human comfort – and not examined too closely afterwards.

There is a parallel here to *I, Robot* – in the short story “Reason” a robot named QT-1, assembled far from Earth and having only two human acquaintances (or rather, overseers), comes to the realization that humans did not create him and that Earth does not exist. QT-1 starts a cult of robots on the station he was assembled on – but the humans leave QT-1 be, even as the robot confines the humans to a room and does not allow them to enter other ‘holy’ parts of the station. No action is taken against QT-1 and there is no serious effort to dissuade QT-1 of his delusions once the human overseers realize that the robot still completes the job it was programmed to complete because the robot's three laws are still intact and QT-1 will never harm a human, or allow a human to come to harm. In both *I, Robot* and *Tik-Tok*, humans rely on Asimov's three laws – and said laws are the only reason why humans feel so comfortable around robots.

In *Tik-Tok*, however, Sladek addresses this reliance on the three laws through *Tik-Tok*. He is allowed to commit the horrible crimes he commits because humans do not look closely at the motivations or actions of robots because they are sure that robots could never harm another human.

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Furthermore, Tik-Tok's violence is contrasted against that of the violence of humans – who have no innate laws programmed into them that prevents humans from committing violence against others or against the robots they own. Throughout the story, Sladek hammers in the point that the capacity for violence is inherent in almost every living being – and that to fear violence from sentient technology is absurd because humans have and will continue to commit acts of violence against one another, yet are still allowed to have bodily autonomy in a way both the robots in Tik-Tok and I, Robot are not.

## **Works Cited**

Asimov, Isaac. I, Robot. New York, Bantam, 2008. Sladek, John. Tik-Tok. London, Gollancz, 1985.