

I, robot: a review of the novel by isaac asimov

Profession, Writer



The novel focuses on the conflict between human and robot in many aspects, based on the interviewed with Dr. Calvin, chief robopsychologist of U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men, Inc. It is a framing sequence featuring Dr. Calvin's life's work. The book was sequentially published during 1940 and 1950, while the stories are depicted from the birth of Dr. Calvin, 1982, to her death, 2065. Other characters appear in these fiction stories are Powell and Donovan, a field-testing team which finds flaws in USRMM's prototype models.

Review

It is quite a shock for me after I went through the whole book, since the reason why I chose I, Robot is because the movie we watched in the lecture inspired me to read the original story. Actually, there are a lot of differences between the movie I, Robot (2004) and the novel it is based on. For example the movie focuses mainly on the conflict initiated from a police and a special type of robot, NS-5, while the novel describes in detail the different stages of development of human society together with the increasing need of robots in our daily lives.

But I would say it is somehow a great comparison for both audiences of the movie and readers of the book because the movie itself had to have some modification on the script for commercial purposes, so it is inappropriate to make a conclusion whether the movie was stuck to the novel written by Isaac Asimov or not.

Fun fact is, some predictions from the novel are actually happening in our current era, while some are incorrect. It's no wonder that the author, a

professor of biochemistry, was praised as " a national wonder and a natural resource" [1] for his explanation in this technological age, unveiling that science fictions are no longer merely stories lived on paper but rather turning into reality in the foreseeable future.

Sometimes I would ask myself whether there do exist a higher authority overseeing the human society and more other areas, and if there do, then who they are and how they are going to treat us in those severe conditions, will they give us a hand or will they abandon us. In biological field there is a term called " natural selection" which highlights the motive force of evolution. But how do we know the force is natural or not, or maybe the evolution follows some certain rules beyond our imaginations. The book mentioned a critical idea that the robots are actually not obeying to human but to the Master.

In chapter Reason, the robot Cutie kept mentioning the Master and made an announcement that, first thing first the Master created human beings, the lowest creation, then the Master created the robots, the next higher step, and now it is time to take place of the last humans. " From now on, I serve the Master." The story was set in 2016 which for us, we know it's not what really happened as predicted, but who says we are not moving toward this direction? Now the factories need no more employees because the automatic system shows higher efficiency and accuracy, the hospitals are lowering their budget on human resources because robots are gradually taking over the health caring jobs which require enough patience and energy.

I think one thing the book successfully predicted is that a robotic nursemaid, or more commonly babysitter, would be the first artificial intelligence product that walks into the house. At first sight they appear harmless and even show some human like caring behaviors. Let's look at Siri, Alexa, or any other personal digital assistant (PDA) now available [2]. Once the kids rely heavily on these artificial assistants, there's going to be a certain degree of risk that they might be isolated from real human society, and the worst thing I can come up with is that who will these kids listen to when they grow up, is it their parents, the robots, or themselves?

And how we are going to explain to the kids that the robots are not real people and you should go play with other kids and those robots will not stay with us forever, not to mention being destroyed in scrap yards. As one may think that once this intimate relationship is established, it is not going to be an easy task to alienate we humans from robots. Does that mean we are going to be controlled entirely or if there is anything we can do to prevent it from happening?

To answer these questions, we have to think of a rather philosophic issue, that what is the cause of robot's existence. Since any hypothesis must be backed by a certain reason or else it is worthless and meaningless. How can we convince every self-educated and technology-based robots that they are made for some certain reasons, is the key stone we get to carry out before jumping into the generation of robots.

As for my observation, there is some religious ideology in framing robots in the novel, or any other robot related science fictions. In fact, we are playing

the role of the almighty god, trying to create a creature from zero and teach it emotions and the ability to wonder. If they, the robots mentioned in books, make any single mistake, are we the ones to be blamed since they are made according to our ideal images?

Some ethical concerns are inevitable if the problem remains unsolved, for example, if we provide a robot an everlasting love while it was manufactured, later give it an order to take part in a war and to kill, this will definitely hurt the robot's "feelings" and whether the robot has the right to say no to the order is another issue worth concerning. If we look carefully at the Three Laws of Robotics, it's not hard to find some interesting flaws in the laws. In the chapter Runaround, published in 1942, the robot Speedy just could not come back to the station on the Mercury, forcing the two astronauts risked their lives to look for it and found it moving forward and backward from the mercury pit.

The reason why it made this movement is because the second law and the third law conflict with each other, when Speedy got too close to the poisonous pit it would follow the second law to protect its own existence, but when it got too far from the pit it would follow the second law to obey orders given by human beings, resulting in this inefficient but well balanced movement.

There are more conflicts between the laws as we can refer from the critics, and the author was actually open to them and welcomed everyone to find the defects, since the rules are set to be broken as the old saying goes. An open-ended problem is also revealed in the novel that once the robots

possess the ability to think, they will undoubtedly question the rules again and again and who can assure the robots won't rebel against human and cause further uncontrollable chaos once they found the flaws between the laws.

" Technology has always come from humanity," a slogan proposed by mobile phone manufacturer over 20 years ago [3], showing the reason behind why we started developing robots. In the 1940s, the decade the author wrote these short stories, people didn't have too many entertainments comparing with nowadays, the connections between individuals are strong and unalienable, and it was not too difficult to find someone to share the ideas, the pleasure, and the agony.

But since the social division became more and more specific than ever before, we were grouped into smaller and smaller groups with different interests and different goals, which made it hard to find others to share with. And we started thinking of making an artificial product for accompanying, for taking care of the elders and youngsters, for giving us a little comfort whenever we are in need.

So I would say that Isaac Asimov is not a prophet as many indicated but rather an observer who made some almost accurate assumptions of the future world, based on his knowledge of the trend. As for some legal concern we are going to face, let's examine a postulated situation that a robot accidentally (according to rule #1, a robot may not injure a human being) causes a man's death, then who should be responsible for the accident, is it the scientist and inventor of the robot? I don't think so.

Because the scientist and inventor simply made their best to solve problems and prevent anything that is possibly harmful. Is it the robot itself who should shoulder all the responsibilities? Again, I would not agree on that, for it is ridiculous to sue a robot, not even a living human, in the court. So after all the possible solutions, we will get a conclusion that the man was died of some mechanical negligence, which is pretty weird but do make sense to me. " Does the robot has free will to make its own decision" is the point that signifies the status of the robot in the trial, but whether there is free will or not is still a debate among almost every areas of study, then how can we apply this idea on the robots?

In the interview with Dr. Calvin, there is a paragraph that really touched me, which goes, " there was a time when humanity faced the universe alone and without a friend. Now he has creatures to help him; stronger creatures than himself, more faithful, more useful, and absolutely devoted to him. Mankind is no longer alone." It is no wonder that our increasing need for robots is arose from the deepest part of our hearts.

Loneliness is that unpleasant emotion no one would like to experience, but however it is getting more and more familiar for modern citizens. Just go check the news, and one will find the never ending tragedies, associated with lonely people, appearing on television.

Once you see a robber committed crime due to the high unemployment rate, you should be careful of robot competition for human jobs; and when you find the elders and the youngsters are not receiving proper caring because of the population structure can no longer support the long-term care system,

you should be aware of companion robot showing up around you in the future house. It sounds really inauthentic for me before I read I, Robot, but now concerning all the aspects the author specified, I would say the truth is that sooner or later, robots will be part of our society and it won't take long and it is the obvious which is so difficult to see most of the time.

As for the modification of the novel, I think it should be the communication between human brain and positronic brain (artificial intelligence brain for robots as well as the energy storage to work properly in the novel). The positronic brain provides robots society an isolated system of communication, even the brain waves are strong enough to send message to each other, silently and secretly.

Since human cannot be involved in the communication, we are unable to understand what they are thinking if they really are. Nowadays, neural psychology has evolved so quickly and I believe soon there will be a method to connect two different system. But in this case, a bigger concern is arose: if two systems are connected, does this means robots can in parallel understand what humans are thinking also?

Another minor modification I would like to propose is there should be a renewal of spaceships and the astronauts suit. During I read the book, a question kept annoying me is that why don't they get the spaceship fixed or the suit updated, in this way around half the problems they faced are solved. For the technology nowadays, it is impossible for government or any private industrial companies to sent astronauts without proper and safe suits, since training an astronaut is never an easy task.

One thing I would like to explain is, it is never intended to offend robots by calling them "it" in this article but I can barely find a politically correct synonym to represent robots. Anyway, I still look forward to a future shared with robots, because there are already too many problems that exist and it's about the time for robots to give us a hand, and what we have to do is getting prepared to cope with them as well as learning from the lessons we read from the sci-fi.

References

1. George Gaylord Simpson, in *Science*, April 23, 1961 (as quoted by Asimov in *In Joy Still Felt* (1980), p. 232)
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3. Jacob Steinberg, "Nokia: Still Connecting People," *seekingalpha*, para. 1, Nov. 25, 2013. [Online], Available: <https://seekingalpha.com/article/1860171-nokia-still-connecting-people> [Accessed Aug. 1, 2019].