Rossums universal robots: the morality of machines essay

War

Rossum’s Universal Robots, or R. U. R., is a play written by the Czech playwright Karel Capek. Capek, as a playwright, made a distinct attempt to create a new type of world on the stage, a world in which he could utilize the thought experiment of Robots, or synthetic humans, to examine the very fabric of humanity. Because of the tumultuous historical time in which Capek lived, his work was focused directly upon the the inability of the human race to break free from the cycle of repeating historical mistakes over and over again. Capek was particularly concerned with the cyclical nature of the past and the future, and humanity’s apparent inability to learn from the mistakes it made; while other thematic ideas appear in his play, none are as bald-faced or apparent as this. Although some critics may argue that the ending of the play is a hopeful one and one that suggests the rebirth of humanity, a cynical viewer could easily see the rebirth at the end of the play symbolic of the continuous and never-ending mistakes made by humanity.

Capek’s “ robots” are somewhat unique in the science fiction sense, in that they are not so much robots as they are clones or synthetic biological creations (Capek). This raises some interesting philosophical questions regarding the nature of humanity and the nature of life; it is particularly important when considering the time period in which the play was written. Capek wrote his play during a particularly tumultuous time in European history, in the interim between the end of World War I and the height of World War II; everything during this time was complex and complicated, and the world was changing faster than ever before. The Industrial Revolution had spread technological advances so quickly that the layperson could hardly keep up, and the changes probably seemed overwhelming. It is

interesting, then, to see that Capek utilizes aspects of the classic works in his piece so readily.

Perhaps the most telling references to the classic works of literature are the names used in the play. Helena, the main character from Act I, is a name that was decidedly unusual for the time period; indeed, her name could harken back to the works of Shakespeare or even be a reference to Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world and the cause of the Trojan War. This theory is an idea proposed by Cornell.

Cornell suggests heavily that Capek was using a literary allusion to the Trojan War when writing R. U. R. Capek writes:

At apparent odds with [R. U. R.'s] focus on technology—its dehumanizing consequences and potential dangers—are repeated allusions to the ancients and particularly to the story of Troy. So why, in what seems like a thoroughly modern play with modern concerns, is Capek evoking the ancients? And second, what does this reintroduction of the ancients contribute to the conversation concerning global technology? whereas Capek's use of the Trojan War turns us back to fundamental questions of human nature (Cornell)

The Trojan War reference suggested by Cornell is, perhaps, a tenuous connection at best; the defining moment of the Trojan War is the Greeks' Trojan Horse, a ploy used to force the Trojans to open the gates of Troy and allow their enemy inside. Over the course of the play, the Robots do indeed attack a fortified factory during the war with humanity; however, they do not use guile or sneakiness to overcome humanity; humanity is overcome by sheer numbers and, also, by the depth of their own ignorance and arrogance

(Capek). Humanity is eventually destroyed by the Robots, much in the same way the Greeks destroyed Troy and the Trojans; however, the analogy loses rationality there.

Helena’s human character is much more convincing if looked upon as a reference to the great Shakespearean play A Midsummer Night’s Dream. During the course of this play, the character of Helena begins as a vulnerable, wounded character, only to find herself stronger and more independent by the end of the play (Shakespeare and Foakes). Shakespeare’s Helena is sensitive, but refuses to let her sensitivity be used as an excuse for the other characters to force her into action that she does not believe in; she is headstrong and stubborn. In Capek’s work, Helena destroys the formula for creating Robots, thus dooming humanity to its fate; however, Capek makes it clear that she does this for altruistic reasons, believing that she is truly helping to solve the ethical problems of the Robot war (Capek). It is by her actions that, although humanity is destroyed, the Robots are allowed to become human, and a brief flicker of hope shines through at the end of the play, as Silver argues.

However, the discussion of the end of the play as a positive one is by no means decisive. Silver suggests that by creating new Robots, Helena and Primus, and allowing them to fall in love and create new Robots, Capek is introducing a brief glimmer of hope into the play; however, it seems much more likely that Capek is merely indicating that the future of humanity is doomed to be repeated in these two characters (Silver). Alquist, the final remaining human at the end of the play, even refers to the two as “ Adam and Eve” (Capek) suggesting that there is some magnitude of original sin

still present in the characters, and that their future is doomed to be as bleak as the humans that came before them.

What makes a character human? Capek's Robots, particularly the more advanced ones, seem to be indistinguishable from humanity, but there is still an aspect of Jentsch's uncanny valley about the characters. While Jentsch was more concerned with the physical aspect of human imitation, there is also a psychological aspect of human imitation that lends credence to the theory of the uncanny valley. Capek writes the following lines from one of the Robots in the play:

Second Robot: We've become being with souls.

Fourth Robot: Something is struggling within us. There are moments when something gets into us. Thoughts come to us that are not are own. (Capek)

No human being would describe their feelings and their souls in this manner; because the Robots are unused to having souls, or consciences, they have chosen words that technically approximate the feeling of having a soul or conscience but still set their characters apart from true humanity, although the distinction is difficult to parse.

Cornell's argument about the foreshadowing of the future by the names of the robots does present a much more convincing argument than the argument regarding the Trojan War analogy, however. After every great war there is a common refrain: the idea that humanity, as a whole, must remember the past or be forever condemned to repeat it; this fear is very clear in Capek's work. Cornell writes:

Standing against such long-standing fundamental questions is our propensity for forgetting The names of the robots foreshadow the coming revolution of

the robots, but more important, they highlight the forgetting of the pastthey are a reminder that republican freedoms may be quickly lost to dictatorship and empire (Cornell).

The use of foreshadowing in literature and theater is often used to forecast the future and to warn the viewer or reader about the events to come; it creates a sense of foreboding and dark excitement in R. U. R. Capek himself could see the dark clouds of the height of World War II looming, and thus the play was born. It is particularly indicative of his nationality and his nation's vulnerability in both the first and second World Wars; while some nations came off less scathed than others, Czechoslovakia was one of the nations hit extremely hard by both wars. In Capek's play, Dr. Gall, in the midst of a Robot war, suggests that he has a new way to create different and more advanced Robots, thus indicating that humanity as a whole had not learned the lesson that had been taught the first time they created Robots (Capek).

Another of Cornell's interesting arguments ties directly in with the theory that humanity's history is cyclical, and that human beings have the tendency to make the same mistakes over and over again. Cornell postulates that Capek makes a distinct attempt to question whether or not scientific advancements have been good for humanity; this is clear, by the way that the Robots go to war with and eventually slaughter the human population (Cornell). However, Cornell also notes that:

Capek's suggestion is not that modernity has moved beyond a desire for glory as a critical motivation but that we have completely shifted the arena for acquisition. Technoscience is the field that has replaced the field of battle. [However] the analogy between the ancient martial pursuit of glory

and the modern technoscientific pursuit would seem to break down [because] the end of science is ultimately to benefit humanity, unlike the destructive ends of the ancient warriors. Capek challenges these assumptions. (Cornell)

During the course of World War I, humanity witnessed the largest loss of life on the battlefield than it had ever witnessed before, mostly as a result of technological advances. Capek, rather than seeing technology as a way forward for humanity, merely saw the technological advancements of the civilization being put to violent and various terrible uses that he could not condone. Rather than two men fighting each other with swords, a million men were fighting each other with machine guns; in Capek's view, the cyclical nature of human violence and irresponsibility would eventually lead to humanity's downfall and, perhaps, its utter and final destruction.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Capek's play, however, is its continued applicability today. In R. U. R., two of Capek's most important characters have the following exchange:

Domin: Practically speaking, what is the best kind of worker?

Helena: The best? Probably the one who-- who-- who is honest-- and dedicated.

Domin: No, it's the one that's the cheapest. The one with the fewest needs he virtually rejected the human being and created the Robot. (Capek)

This may seem to merely be the ramblings of a power-hungry businessman, but this mentality is still common in the world today. One needs only to look at the state of labor laws in China and Southeast Asia to see that the

glorification of cheap labor has not become a less-lauded value of business. The truth of these lines still echo in humanity’s share conscience today, which is, perhaps, the exact thing that Capek feared upon writing Rossum’s Universal Robots in 1921. He seemed to greatly fear a world in which humanity’s eras and mistakes came in cycles, taking on a slightly different appearance but remaining the same in their impact and devastation. Perhaps Capek was right to fear; after the completion of the play, the world saw another half-century of war, and some of the worst genocides ever committed by humankind against other human beings of different races. Capek’s choice of science fiction as a method of delivery for his literary and philosophical teachings was particularly impactful, much in the same way that science fiction was incredibly useful for Mary Shelley’s landmark work, Frankenstein. Using science fiction as a genre allowed the writers to examine ideas and theories outside of the normalized context that the reader or viewer would normally see them in, framing the context and throwing the thematic ideas that were most important in the work into stark relief.

The Robots of Capek’s work are not the mindless enemy that they sometimes seem to be in other types of science fiction works. Capek’s Robots are intelligent, and become moreso over the course of the play; they also become more sympathetic, until at the end of the play, the viewer has functionally forgotten that these characters are not human in any real capacity. In this way, Capek blurs the line between man and Robot, effectively asking the question of what truly makes humanity human.

Works cited

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