

COMP4920 Essay 2

Question: Is kicking a robot dog morally wrong, or morally permissible? In your answer, make explicit detailed reference to virtue ethics. Which answer or answers might virtue ethics give us? Are any of these answers correct? Why? Justify your answer

Whether kicking a robot dog is morally wrong or allowed can be considered within the framework of virtue ethics. Virtue Ethics is an ethical theory that emphasizes the role of personal character and virtue in moral behavior. It differs from utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, which respectively focus on the consequences of behavior and the moral rules of the behavior itself. Theories such as Kantianism and utilitarianism ignore the most fundamental emotions of humans, advocating that emotions are an irrational source and hinder clear moral thinking (Bennet, 2015). For them, the correctness of behavior depends on whether it will produce the best results or whether it conforms to moral principles. Just like kicking a robot dog, if this behavior brings good results, it may be considered advisable. This also indicates that utilitarianism and Kantianism overlook some intuitive moral evaluations of our behavior that are important. Unlike utilitarianism and Kantianism, the core viewpoint of virtue ethics is that a morally good life is a life led by individuals who possess and practice virtues. It highlights the importance of individual qualities such as integrity, bravery, kindness, and justice (Bennet, 2015). Therefore, kicking a robot dog does not reflect the good qualities of an individual or group, so this behavior is usually not recognized by virtue ethics.

Moral status is an important factor in evaluating whether kicking a robot dog is permissible. At present, most ethical views such as Kantianism and utilitarianism tend to view robot dogs as objects without moral status. Robot dogs as machines designed and manufactured by humans have no consciousness, emotions, or self-awareness. They cannot experience pain or pleasure, which is a key criterion in many moral theories that endows entities with moral status. From a functional perspective, robot dogs are mainly used as tools or entertainment devices, without the complexity and autonomy of biological entities. They are also seen by most people as a convenient living item rather than an entity with moral rights. Therefore, kicking a robot dog will not have any impact on the robot dog in terms of spirit and perception. If this behavior allows the implementer to experience a sense of happiness, then overall, this behavior will bring some benefits. Under certain moral frameworks, such behavior is considered morally permissible while neglecting the minority who feel uncomfortable and uneasy about it. There are also some different perspectives in virtue ethics. Coeckelbergh believes that the moral status of robot dogs is not fixed, but rather depends on how they integrate into human life practices, habits, and behavioral expressions (Coeckelbergh, 2021) [2]. This means that the moral status of a robot dog is dynamic, and if interaction with a robot dog can promote or showcase positive human virtues such as empathy, responsibility, care, etc., then this interaction may be considered valuable. In this case, robot dogs may be given a certain moral status as they help promote human moral growth. On the contrary, if interaction with robot dogs reflects negative human qualities such as cruelty, violence, or disrespect, it may indicate that such interaction is morally unacceptable. Although robot dogs may not have autonomy or perceptual abilities themselves, their poor treatments such as kicking them may reflect the moral deficiency of those who treat them. Coeckelbergh also emphasized the moral

impact of interacting with robot dogs, not only on the robot dog itself, but more importantly on the moral character of human actors themselves (Coeckelbergh, 2021) [2]. This viewpoint suggests that even though robotic dogs may not have a moral status in the traditional sense, their role and influence in human life may have moral importance.

From the perspective of virtue ethics, kicking a robot dog may reflect the actor's violent tendencies, cruelty, or disrespect, which are not considered virtues. Even if robot dogs do not have a fixed moral status or the ability to feel pain, they are just artificial intelligence invented by humans. This behavior can also display negative qualities such as lack of compassion, cruelty, or indifference, which is also a departure from virtue. If the behavior of kicking a robot dog causes people to fall into a negative emotional state instead of being a catalyst for mood adjustment, then this behavior is morally problematic (Coeckelbergh, 2021) [4]. Furthermore, this behavior potentially undermines harmonious human-machine relationships and contradicts socially recognized positive ethical practices. The way humans treat robotic dogs may be imitated by others, especially children, and the majority of people in society treating robot dogs in a bad way may become a negative example, which can have a negative impact on social morality.

There are also some evidences that kicking robotic dogs is sometimes a way for many people to vent their emotions or for development engineers to test their performance. Because robotic dogs themselves do not have pain sensation, people will not have a particularly significant impact on them when they are subjected to a series of blows. By taking advantage of this, the convenience and benefits of using a robotic dog as a vent or test object may outweigh the damage caused to it, meaning that overall, this behavior can provide some avails. However, although robotic dogs do not have feelings, using them as objects for emotional venting still poses a problem because the violent impact brought about by this behavior is not advocated by virtue ethics. Virtue ethics emphasizes personal qualities behind behavior. Whether an action is considered moral depends on whether it originates from virtue and demonstrates the good qualities of the actor. Using a biological form of machine as an outlet for anger may lead individuals to develop habitual or numb feelings towards violent behavior. It is also inappropriate to test the performance of a robotic dog in a rough manner, this does not showcase actor's personal qualities. Performance testing should be based on scientific and engineering principles, rather than imitating abusive behavior. There are many more reasonable and scientific methods to test the durability and functionality of robotic dogs. In the long run, the negative impact of kicking a robotic dog on oneself and others is also quite profound. Sparrow mentioned in his article that cruelty towards robots may reveal bad habits in our personalities, while kindness towards them may not necessarily reflect virtues (Sparrow, 2021) [3], he pondered the conflict between moral intuitions about evaluating our treatment of robots. Sparrow described a scene of kicking a robotic dog in a demonstration video, which sparked strong reactions from some viewers (Sparrow, 2021) [3]. From this, it can be seen that kicking a robot dog is highly contagious when it is disseminated online as a video or demonstration. It may inspire some people's inner sense of justice, making them feel angry and sympathetic towards the actions in the video, or it may serve as a tool to expose the cruelty in some people's hearts, making them imitate such behavior as in the video. More seriously, some young children who do not yet have any moral values may find this behavior very interesting and fun after watching this video, so they subconsciously consider it as a correct behavior and call

on more peers to imitate it. If many people imitate such violent behavior, it not only damages the moral atmosphere of society, but also has a negative impact on the long-term development of the country. As a result, kicking robot dog not only has serious consequences for society, but also is contrary to virtue, which is usually an incorrect behavior.

Bennet mentioned in his article that virtue ethics holds that correct behavior is based on the correct motivation, while correct motivation is a virtue that adapts to the situation (Bennet, 2015). In virtue ethics, motivation is an important factor in determining whether an action is correct. Acting like a person with virtue does not necessarily mean that the person and the action are virtuous, but rather that their behavior is motivated by the same correct motivation as the person with virtue. From the perspective of kicking a robot dog, even if the outcome may be positive at some particular scenario such as testing their performance. If the behavior is motivated by the wrong motives, such as cruelty or anger, then the behavior is unethical. Correct behavior is not only about results or adherence to rules, but more about the motivation and character of the actor. Kicking a robotic dog often reflects negative personal qualities and inappropriate motives, which goes against virtue. Therefore, virtue ethics believe that this is not an appropriate behavior. On the contrary, if we approach the robotic dog with a benevolent and caring attitude, even if this kind of kindness may not directly affect the robotic dog, this behavior may still be considered positive because it demonstrates good personal qualities and appropriate motivation.

In virtue ethics, specific situations are also considered important factors in determining the correctness of behavior, which means that in different situations, it is necessary to consider which virtues are most appropriate and make appropriate moral judgments. In evaluating an event, we need to understand the specific environment, background, and related factors in which the behavior occurs. This may include considering the intentions of the actors, the potential consequences of the behavior, the interests of all parties involved, cultural and social norms. Although virtue ethics does not focus on consequences as utilitarianism does, it is still important to consider the possible consequences of behavior. In the interaction with the robot dog, it is necessary to consider the background, purpose, potential impact of this interaction, and whether it reflects specific virtues or moral principles. Kicking robotic dogs, which is clearly a form of abuse, spreads not virtues, but rather an unpleasant emotion and quality. Malice is highly discouraged in virtue ethics, which not only focuses on personal character but also on the impact of behavior on others. Although the robotic dog does not feel it, its abuse may affect the observer. This will also create an uncomfortable negative feeling for them, especially for children. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, many teenagers may imitate this behavior, and the entire society will be filled with violence and cruelty, which are unfavorable factors against virtue. What's more, virtue ethics advocates cultivating and embodying virtue through behavior, while kicking the robot dog has no value as a moral example and is difficult to see as embodying or cultivating any positive character. Instead, it may be a cultivation of violence and disrespect. If this behavior is spread or promoted in society, it will have a very negative impact. For example, society may increase its tolerance for violence and distort moral norms as a result, which is not the ideal life advocated by virtue ethics, nor is it a good phenomenon in society.

More seriously, kicking a robot dog may lead to many people engaging in equally rude behavior

towards other machines. Coeckelbergh also proposed the moral argument of cruel habits in his article, the core of which is that cruel behavior towards non-human entities may lead to individuals developing cruel habits, thereby increasing their likelihood of inflicting cruel behavior on humans or other organisms (Coeckelbergh, 2021) [2]. If someone frequently kicks a robot dog, this behavior may become a habit, making it easier for individuals to engage in violent behavior in similar situations. The anger or violent emotions developed in such situations may be generalized to other situations, such as when dealing with real animals or humans. Even if the argument has certain limitations, such as the behavior of kicking a robot dog may not directly affect a person's attitude towards real creatures, especially when they are able to distinguish the differences between robot dogs and creatures. However, this does not rule out that kicking a robotic dog is not an ideal behavior.

In conclusion, kicking a robot dog is morally wrong within virtue ethics because this behavior may be considered a lack of empathy and self-control, as well as a manifestation of violence and cruelty. It not only exhibits the negative quality of behavior, but also has a negative impact on the moral atmosphere of society and other individuals.

Reference:

- [1] Bennett, C. (2015): What is this thing called ethics, 2nd edition, Routledge, Oxford
- [2] Coeckelbergh, M. (2021): How to Use Virtue Ethics for Thinking About the Moral Standing of Social Robots: A Relational Interpretation in Terms of Practices, Habits, and Performance, *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 13:31–40.
- [3] Sparrow, S. (2021): Virtue and Vice in Our Relationships with Robots: Is There an Asymmetry and How Might it be Explained? *International Journal of Social Robotics* (2021) 13:23–29.
- [4] Coeckelbergh, M. (2021): Should We Treat Teddy Bear 2.0 as a Kantian Dog? Four Arguments for the Indirect Moral Standing of Personal Social Robots, with Implications for Thinking About Animals and Humans, *Minds and Machines* (2021) 31:337–360.