

THE ROBOT AND THE BABY

John McCarthy

2001 Jun 28, 1:02 p.m.

“Mistress, your baby is doing poorly. He needs your attention.”

“Stop bothering me, you fucking robot.”

“Mistress, the baby won’t eat. If it doesn’t get some human love, the book says it will die.”

Love the fucking baby, yourself.”

The robot’s model number was GenRob337L3. Its program was GenRob337version 19.2. It was one of about 11 million household robots with those particular characteristics, and its serial number was R337942781. We’ll call it R781 for short.

R781 was designed in accordance with the McCarthy principle, first proposed in 1995 and which became a matter of law for household robots when they first became available in 2025. The principle was adopted out of concern that children who grew up in a household with robots would regard them as persons: causing psychological difficulties while they were children and political difficulties when they grew up. One concern was that a robots’ rights movement would develop. The problem was not with the robots, which were programmed to have no desires of their own but with people. Some romantics had even demanded that robots be programmed with desires of their own, but this was illegal.

In accordance with the McCarthy principle R781 was built in the shape of a giant metallic spider with 8 limbs, 4 with joints and 4 tentacular. Most people were frightened by the appearance at first but got used to it in a short time. A few people never could learn to have them in the house. Children also reacted negatively at first but got used to them. Babies scarcely noticed them. They spoke as little as was consistent with their functions and in a slightly repellent metallic voice not associated with either sex. This seemed