Dear Mr. Ackerman,

I am Alex Murphy, but you may know me as Robocop. I alone understand living as a human and a robot. As the lines blur between man and machine, there are many different arguments about the aforementioned creatures, but a key debate appears, whether or not we program robots to feel pain. While I see the potential benefits of adding a pain response to robots for human safety, humanity cannot give human qualities to robots without considering the target robot’s situation, as shown in Asimov’s three laws.

In situations of domestic labor, a pain reaction for a robot could be beneficial to humans. For instance, if a fire-fighting robot overheats, it might combust. It would be essential to remove the machine from the situation. Otherwise, the robot might attempt to save nearby people but instead end up injuring them. A robot’s ability to recognize damage may be the most effective line of defense to save human life.

Alternatively, in situations with robots in a military or police setting, a pain response would likely endanger innocent civilians. The robot may view itself as damaged and not able to continue its job, so it would abandon its duty and leave helpless people unguarded. For the protection of the public, a robot may need to sacrifice itself for the safety of the people for whom the robot serves. An automated bodyguard would definitely encounter a situation where it would take damage while protecting its charges. Pain may detract from its prime directive.

Interestingly, you mention Isaac Asimov in your article when you try to validate your suggestion of giving robots a sense of pain. I believe his Three Laws of Robotics are essential to understanding your idea. The First Law mandates that a robot must never harm a human or by inaction allow a human to come to harm. The pain response is necessary when the machine’s function is to protect human life. The Second Law states that robots must follow human orders unless they would cause the robot to break First Law. The pain response should not be included when it prevents a robot from following human directions. Finally, the Third Law states that a robot must protect its own existence unless the other two rules are broken. The pain response is inappropriate when self-preservation would cause a robot to endanger a human.

The advent of pain-sensing technology has major potential benefits to help humans in the future. Observing Asimov’s Laws will assist in protecting the people who work with these machines. If we are not careful with our choices, human safety may take a nasty turn for the worse when our robotic protectors abandon us in a time of crisis. Because of this, we must always proceed with caution in our endeavors, robotic or not.

Best wishes,

Alex Murphy