Preface

At one time I had considered titling this book *A Vindication of the Rights of Machines*, for two reasons. First, such a designation makes reference to and follows in the tradition of "vindication discourses," if one might be permitted such a phrase, that begins with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) followed two years later by *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Thomas Taylor's intentionally sarcastic yet remarkably influential response *A Vindication of the Rights of Brutes*, also published in the year 1792. Following suit, this book inquires about and advances the question concerning the possibility of extending rights and responsibilities to machines, thereby comprising what would be the next iteration in this lineage of discourses addressing the rights of previously excluded others.

The second reason was that I had previously employed the title "The Machine Question" in another book, *Thinking Otherwise: Philosophy, Communication, Technology* (Gunkel 2007), as the heading to that text's final chapter. And it is always good strategy to avoid this kind of nominal repetition even if, as is the case, this undertaking is something of a sequel, extension, and elaboration of that previous effort. To complicate matters and to "return the favor," this book ends with a chapter called, quite deliberately, "thinking otherwise," which has the effect of transforming what had come before into something that now can be read as a kind of sequel. So using the "vindication" moniker would have helped minimize the effect of this mirror play.

But I eventually decided against this title, again for two reasons. First, "vindication discourses" are a particular kind of writing, similar to a manifesto. The opening lines of Taylor's text indicate the kind of tone and rhetoric that is to be expected of such an undertaking: "It appears at first sight somewhat singular, that a moral truth of the highest importance, and

most illustrious evidence, should have been utterly unknown to the ancients, and not yet fully perceived, and universally acknowledged, even in such an enlightened age as the present. The truth I allude to is, *the equality of all things, with respect to their intrinsic and real dignity and worth*" (Taylor 1966, 9). There is nothing in the following that approaches this kind of direct and bold declaration of self-evident and indubitable truths. For even that approach needs to be and will be submitted to critical questioning. Consequently, the moniker *A Vindication of the Rights of Machines*, as useful as it first seems, would have been a much more accurate description of the final chapter to *Thinking Otherwise*, which dissimulates this kind of rhetoric in an attempt to make a case for the advancement of the rights of machines in opposition to the anthropocentric tradition in moral philosophy.

Second, the title *The Machine Question* not only makes reference to and leverages the legacy of another moral innovation—one that has been situated under the phrase "the animal question"—but emphasizes the role and function of *questioning*. Questioning is a particularly philosophical enterprise. Socrates, as Plato describes in the *Apology*, does not get himself into trouble by making claims and proclaiming truths. He simply investigates the knowledge of others by asking questions (Plato 1990, 23a). Martin Heidegger, who occupies a privileged position on the continental side of the discipline, begins his seminal *Being and Time* (1927) not by proposing to answer "the question of being" with some definitive solution, but by attending to and renewing interest in the question: "Haben wir heute eine Antwort auf die Frage nach dem, was wir mit dem Wort 'seiend' eigentlich meinen? Keineswegs. Und so gilt es denn, *die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein* erneut zu stellen [Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being?' Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*]" (Heidegger 1962, 1). And on the other side of the philosophical divide, G. E. Moore, whom Tom Regan (1999, xii) called "analytic philosophy's patron saint," takes a similar approach, writing the following in, of all places, the preface to his influential *Principia Ethica* (1903): "It appears to me that in Ethics, as in all other philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer" (Moore 2005, xvii).

In the end, I decided on the title *The Machine Question*, precisely because what follows draws on, is dedicated to, and belongs to this philosophical lineage. As such, the analysis presented in this book does not endeavor to answer the question concerning the moral status of the machine with either a "yes" or "no." It does not seek to prove once and for all that a machine either can be or cannot be a legitimate moral subject with rights and responsibilities. And it does not endeavor to identify or to articulate moral maxims, codes of conduct, or practical ethical guidelines. Instead it seeks *to ask the question*. It endeavors, as Heidegger would describe it, to learn to attend to the machine question in all its complexity and in the process to achieve the rather modest objective, as Moore describes it, of trying to discover what question or questions we are asking before setting out to try to supply an answer. For this reason, if *The Machine Question* were to have an epigraph, it would be these two opening statements from Heidegger and Moore (two philosophers who could not be more different from each other), concerning the role, function, and importance of questioning.