

Vincent Cavanna

Doctor Sepper

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Autonomous Creatures Should Never Exist

Frankenstein's creature is not just terrifying in its own right. While much more dramatic than a work of nonfiction, Shelley's work warns the reader of the same dangers of technology as Winner describes it. The creature does not obey the expected conventions of technology as established by Winner. While the story is fiction, the creature Frankenstein creates is emblematic of the problem of autonomous technology.

First of all, it is important to note that the creature is autonomous. A very committed defender of Frankenstein's creature might say that it is simply a product of its unsympathetic environment. That is true to an extent, but in addition to the effects of environment it also exercises a choice. One example is what the creature chooses to believe about itself: is it human? Or is it a demon? While circumstances for the creature change, the basic facts of its existence remain the same. No amount of environmental changes can change the species of the creature. Why, then, does its opinion change? In one moment, the creature says it "required kindness and sympathy, but I did not believe myself utterly unworthy of it." (p.157, Shelley) In another, the creature exclaims "Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust?" (p.155, Shelley) This is because the creature can exercise a choice about what to believe about itself. In the same way, the creature can largely exercise its choices and form its own opinions, and choose for itself its own actions.

The creature's autonomy directly correlates to the chief concern of Winner: a "loss of mastery" (p.30, Winner). Winner's fear is that, as man's technological prowess grows, there is a "decline of our ability to know, to judge, or to control our technical means." (p.30, Winner) This is certainly true in the case of the creature, since the creature has a mind of its own. Once the creature is created, Frankenstein has no control of the consequences. The creature can harm anyone that it wants, from strangers to Frankenstein's friends and family.

Since the scope of havoc from the creature is impossible to predict, it also breaks the expected convention that persons understand which technologies influence them. According to Winner, even if someone is not the inventor, they should have an understanding "of the total range of technologies that affect his or her life." (p.27, Winner) However, such an understanding is almost impossible with the creature. First of all, Frankenstein repeatedly laments that he created a "demoniacal enemy" for himself and the world (p.260); buildings burn, bystanders are implicated as murderers, all without knowledge of how or why it happens. For him to correct his errors, he would have to educate the whole world. Even if he were willing to do this, as in the case of the magistrate, he will find extreme difficulty in convincing others of this truth. This is quite contrary to conventional technology: instead of human beings willing their technology to achieve some goal, they are subjected to technology without their knowledge with consequences beyond their imagination. Even Frankenstein himself, the inventor, does not know what to expect out of his device.

Finally, there is the question of whether the creature that Frankenstein has created is what Winner calls a "neutral means to human ends," to which I respond definitely no. This is not because it is not neutral, but because it pursues its own ends. The creature has "feelings of affection," (p.205, Shelley) albeit unrequited, and a passion for revenge "dearer than light or

food.” (p.206, Shelley) This is not the end that Frankenstein expected: he had hoped “a new species would bless me as its creator and source.” (p.54, Shelley) The creature’s passion for revenge and desire for affection are not human ends; they are the creature’s ends.

The creature, then, is a threefold rejection of conventional technological theory; the fact of its autonomy demonstrates that. However, there is room for subtlety here. It is very possible that the creature is neutral. We should doubt when Frankenstein says the creature is a “demon” (p.95, Shelley). It can also be a very ugly imitation of the human body with a human soul. The creature himself puts it best: “my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?” The truth of who is right is very difficult to tell. It seems natural, to use a word dissonant with the situation, that the creature formed with human parts should receive a human soul. However, to consider Frankenstein’s point, all of the creature’s story could be a lie. When he saw the creature leering at the window, he may really have seen daemonic malevolence in its eyes, or he might have read into it. There is one indication of the truth of the creature’s point. Most of the work is the colored narrative of Frankenstein or the creature. However, at the end of the book, the captain himself writes a portion about Frankenstein’s death. The sadness of the creature as it asks the dead Frankenstein to pardon him? That seems genuine. The creature does not benefit from such a deception.

However, on reading Frankenstein, I am left with one ultimate conclusion: regardless of the circumstances, and regardless of whether or not it is human, it should never have been invented. Even if it was made to look human, and Frankenstein was to rear it like a child. I would apply the conventional expectations of how technology works as a litmus test and believe in the goodness of a humanity that does not stretch the bounds of nature through science. That is the moral Frankenstein attempts to tell, and it is also the same moral that I believe.

Works Cited

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein*. 1831st ed., 2018.

Winner, Langdon. *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*. M I T Press, 1992.