

COMP4920 Ethics Essay

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

Morality can be defined as the principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. However, the basis on deducing this right and wrong behaviour can be subjective and vary in perspectives. The utilitarian perspective infers that a behaviour or action is more correct than another if it brings about more happiness. On the other hand, Kant's viewpoint states that if an action in its basic and general form upholds respect to "rational agency," (human beings), it must be universally followed regardless of one's desire or circumstances (Bennet, 2015, p. 90).

We can evidently see that the utilitarian perspective of moral reasoning neglects emotions, for example, if kicking a robot dog brought about more happiness for the software developers who are testing their product, this perspective will deem this action of kicking the robot dog as morally permissible despite neglecting the minority who are unhappy and disturbed by this action. In a similar manner when examining the Kantian perspective, we note that the robot dog does not belong to the Kantian definition of a rational agent. In spite of this, Kant would still likely argue that kicking a robot dog should not be morally accepted. This is seen when we view his analysis on a similar scenario on deeming it as immoral, stating that shooting a dog may bring out negative qualities within us and may cause us to inflict harm on other "rational agents", those being human beings (Coeckelbergh 2021, p. 341). Nonetheless, Kant's reasoning behind his moral verdict can be seen as flawed because he disregards the cruelty inflicted on the animals themselves and does not include animals to the group of "rational agents".

Hence when analysing the moral reasoning of kicking a robot dog, it becomes integral to apply a perspective that will not only include the emotions of other beings, but also encourage positive behaviour thus ultimately positive consequences through a more meaningful existence. This will in turn bring justice to the plethora of possible situations we may have to consider when deducing morality. Virtue ethics is such a system in which morality is attributed to those actions which consist of or promote virtuous character as opposed to Kant's deontological viewpoint and the manner in which utilitarianism excludes

an entities emotion (Bennet, 2015, p. 96). By applying an approach of virtue ethics when analysing whether or not kicking a robot dog is morally permissible, we are able to reach the judgement through more meticulous and appropriate moral reasoning.

Whilst it is evident that the robot dog cannot feel any pain when one kicks it, virtue ethics can imply that there is still something incorrect in regards to this action. In relation to Boston dynamics' engineers kicking their robot dog to demonstrate its stability on the terrain, many viewers *stated that they* "felt uncomfortable or that it seemed wrong to do so" (Coeckelbergh 2021, p. 31). When viewing this video, the animal dog-like movements of the robot reacting to the human kick can give viewers a glimpse of what it would be like if the engineer were to kick a real dog. The viewers may even ponder upon the characteristics of the human who initiated the kick and attribute him with negative qualities. This opinion can be seen to be in alignment with Robert Sparrow's notion on virtue ethics when it comes to mistreating robots, as he states "viciousness towards robots is real viciousness" (Sparrow, 2021, p. 23). Sparrow further states that "it may reveal something about their character," (Sparrow, 2021, p. 23) as the sole action of kicking an animal-like object can damage the characteristics of the person, and as such an action can become habitual and further desensitise them to destructive behaviour. Furthermore, the cruel action does not correspond to virtuous personal qualities such as courage, justice, benevolence or temperance, and rather Sparrow implies that these actions can weaken such characteristics.

Mark Coeckelbergh also shares corresponding opinions with Sparrow and solidifies the importance of virtue ethics when considering this scenario. M.C states that with such robots, "users tend to treat them as pets" and with the "highly interactive features, users get much easier deceived into thinking that there is something real going on" (Coeckelbergh 2021, p. 337) . In doing so, M.C is highlighting that the ethical and moral viewpoint on whether kicking a robot dog is permissible, is not in regards to the individual action being committed, but rather what it reflects about the character of the person committing it. M.C gives insight into four arguments in which moral standing should be given to a robot (Coeckelbergh 2021, p. 341). These can be summarised as follows:

1. The human's involvement in the wrongdoing is imperative despite it being against a robot
2. Some humans may get attached to robots and develop feelings about/for it hence a moral standing should be applied
3. Humans play and collaborate with robots and from the viewpoint that the robot is a partner in play or collaboration, a moral standing should be given to it
4. If there is any doubt on the moral standing of the robot, the human should give it at least some moral standing.

It can evidently be seen that what we have in common between these 4 arguments and scenarios from MC is the implication of the human to have the capacity to care, feel and develop emotion for a robot. It is integral to not focus on the robot in question, but rather the human who is very much capable of exhibiting the same emotional tendencies that were displayed to the robot, instead to another human or living being that can receive the same treatment given to the robot. This moral standpoint from a virtue ethics perspective speaks volumes especially when noting that Kant, coming from a universal deontological perspective, was able to upgrade his ethical viewpoint which was partially inconsiderate, to one that incorporates virtuous values, for the mere reason that the action of shooting a living being (dog) can corrupt the human's virtuous qualities.

Evidently virtue ethics can strongly suggest that kicking a robot dog is morally wrong due to its potential in corrupting a human when mistreating the robot, however it is also important to understand the context in which the action is occurring. Referring back to Boston engineer's kicking a robot dog to test its stability, a plausible argument can be formulated that committing such an action for testing purposes can be separated from kicking it out of emotion such as displaying a lack of temperance or respect for property, or even anger. As such, testing the product that was developed by the software engineers could also in turn, ultimately benefit society through the development of robot dogs that could serve a useful purpose. This may indirectly infer that the engineers can be attributed with virtuous qualities. However, Aristotle, the founder of virtue ethics, proposes the notion of the "unity of virtue," stating that one "cannot look at that virtue in isolation" (Bennet, 2015, p. 103). In doing so, Aristotle implies that two virtues stop operating as virtues when they prevent one from exercising other virtues. In reference to the engineer kicking the robot dog for the purpose of testing, disrespecting property by inflicting

damage upon it to test it for the betterment of society can be seen as two conflicting segments. One may argue that that in order to uphold the virtue of compassion (when developing a useful product for society), the quality of integrity (kicking the robot thus disrespecting property) becomes a vice. A virtue ethics standpoint would hence deem this action as immoral despite the benefit and positive consequences it may bring.

This highlights the flaw with virtue ethics, in that it assumes an agent must perform actions that display only virtuous characteristics for it to be in line with the right moral course of action. The hyperfocus on the characteristics of the person's actions reveals that virtue ethics does not compromise in order to achieve the action which would be deemed as consequentially moral. Additionally, the moral reasoning reveals a rather egoistic perspective as it is only concerned with the individual's own characteristics. For example, kicking a robot dog from a virtue ethics perspective can be deemed as immoral because it reflects badly on the individual, even if it were to ultimately aid in an extravagant development. In his *International Journal of Social Robotics*, Coeckelbergh reinforces this problem when applying virtue ethics, seen in "existing accounts of virtue are focused on the individual...individual virtue or vice" as well as "this focus on the agent is not necessarily problematic if that agent is understood in a relational way," however the author then states "but often this wider field of relations remains of sight in accounts of virtue ethics" (Coeckelbergh 2021, p. 33). Whilst we can agree that virtue ethics can successfully apply a verdict that can reflect virtuous character in a universal manner, it is not flexible in specific scenarios where consequences of the action will outweigh the supposed nature of the personal quality.

Ultimately, virtue ethics makes a clear stance that kicking a robot dog is morally wrong and impermissible because the action committed does not align with virtuous attributes, moreover those destructive actions should not be committed to entities that we are able to interact with and capable of developing feelings about/of. Thus, in accordance with virtue ethics, we must give robots a moral standpoint. This perspective is in line with the Aristotelian notion of a good life in which one should participate in fulfilling meaningful enterprises and relationships (Bennet, 2015, p. 106). One can achieve this by engaging in virtuous actions and refraining from otherwise. However, whilst it is important in focussing only on one's emotions, the individual can appear to be quite infinitesimal when examining the broader picture, and in the right

context and scenario laws which pertain to virtue ethics should be compromised.

In conclusion, kicking a robot dog is morally wrong if the action is committed arbitrarily or out of, or to receive emotion from the sole act of kicking the robot. Whilst a flaw does exist in virtue ethics, it is the most appropriate approach in explaining the rationality behind the verdict. Although this moral judgement should be overridden if the intention behind the action is valid such as testing the product. This is because the consequence is clearly a net positive (successful development of useful product) and the robot cannot feel any pain in achieving this consequence.

References

Coeckelbergh, M. (2021): Does kindness towards robots lead to virtue? A reply to Sparrow's asymmetry argument, *Ethics and Information Technology* (2021) 23:649–656.

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.

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.

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.

Bennett, C. (2015): *What is this thing called ethics*, 2nd edition, Routledge, Oxford