

The New Human: Robot Evolution in Selection from Asimov's Short Stories

Al-Lehaibi S. Majed

Thinking is a unique human quality; it is what makes humans, in the Aristotelian worldview, partly divine since they share this quality with the divine this exercise of thinking. However, in Isaac Asimov's stories, robots share with humanity this quality of thought and awareness of their existence. Like humans, Asimov's robots learn from experience. In the context of his stories, the process of thinking evolves to become in some sense comparable to the human soul. The robot evolves from simple thinking entity to a more complex being crowned by spirituality and religion. As part of Asimov's paradigm, robots have positronic brains that provide them with a form of consciousness. Robots, thus, have three laws embedded in their consciousness. Asimov lists them in his short story "Runaround":

¹A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. ²A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. ³A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (Asimov *The Complete Robot* 269-270) ⁴

These laws leads robots to be effective and more caring about humans' lives, in essence an idealization of the human consciousness. In a story called "Evidence," Susan Calvin, a robopsychologist, describes how robots, the human creation, are better than most human beings, God's creation. In the following passage, she equates the robot to a very good human being:

There are only two ways of definitely proving Byerley to be a robot, sir . . . the physical and the psychological. Physically, you can dissect him or use an X-ray. How to do that would be your problem. Psychologically, his behavior can be studied, for if he is a positronic robot, he must conform to the three Rules of Robotics. A positronic brain cannot be constructed without them. . . . If Mr. Byerley breaks any of those three rules, he is not

1 The Aristotelian God is a mind thinking of itself. Phillip Cary writes, in his *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, "Aristotle's theology is famous for its central tenet that God is utterly separate from the natural world and thinks of nothing but itself: God is in fact defined as intellectual activity understanding itself. . . ." (21).

2 In this article, I use evolution in the sense of linear progression from simple forms to more complex forms, not evolution in the sense of adaptation to environmental changes in which organisms acquire lucky variations that make them more likely to survive. These random variations allow particular organisms to survive and reproduce, while other organisms that do not adapt fall into extinction. The constant incremental accumulation of these random modifications in response to external circumstances explains evolution in the Darwinian sense.

3 Asimov defines the positronic brain in "Reason," a short story, as "calculated neuronic paths, which imbued each robot with what amounted to a pre-natal education" (294).

4 Later, Asimov added the Zeroth Law in his *Prelude to Foundation*: "A robot may not harm humanity, or, by inaction, allow humanity to come to harm" (486).

a robot. Unfortunately, this procedure works in only one direction. If he lives up to the rules, it proves nothing one way or the other...because, if you stop to think of it, the three Rules of Robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems. Of course, every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self-preservation. That's Rule Three to a robot. Also, every "good" human being, with a social conscience and a sense of responsibility, is supposed to defer to proper authority; to listen to his doctor, his boss, his government, his psychiatrist, his fellow man; to obey laws, to follow rules, to conform to custom--even when they interfere with his comfort or his safety. That's Rule Two to a robot. Also, every "good" human being is supposed to love others as himself, protect his fellow man, risk his life to save another. That's Rule One to a robot. To put it simply--if Byerley follows all the Rules of Robotics, he may be a robot, and may simply be a very good man. (529-530)

Robots are, in a sense, made by humans in the ideal image of the Human in the human mind. In their perfection, they are more human than the flesh-and-blood humans. They are superior to humanity as we know it. They demonstrate the human qualities of minds and soul, reason and emotions. In Asimov's "A Boy's Best Friend," a boy lives with his parents on the moon. He has a robotic dog for a long while. He gets used to this robot and develops affection for him. Similarly, the dog loves this boy and takes care of him. The parents trust that their child will be safe as long as he is with the robotic dog. One day, the parents decide to get their child (who has never seen a living dog) a real dog. The boy's answer is one of bewilderment. He cannot grasp the difference between the robot and the real dog. His robotic dog is real to him. Also, when he hears that he'll be replaced, the robotic dog shows a sense of fear as a metallic squeaking. The boy says, "Robot isn't an imitation, Dad, he is my dog" (17). The robot convinces the boy that he can feel and is capable of developing emotional ties with the child. When the father finally agrees that the boy may keep his dog, the dog squeaks happily.

Similarly, in the story "Sally," there are a group of cars with positronic brains. They form their own community of cars and love their caretakers. One female car named Sally is fond of her caretaker and always accompanies him. There are no secrets between them. She intensely hates Raymond Gellhorn, a businessman who tries to steal the brains of the cars and put them in brand new bodies. Their caretaker Jack refuses the offers and Sally ridicules the idea. She does not need a driver and hates to be ridden. At that moment, Raymond Gellhorn forcibly rides her. This action fills her with a sense of revenge; it is comparable to rape. By the end, the cars, along with the bus (the abused slave who hates his master and has enough reason to destroy him), succeed in their plot to kill Raymond Gellhorn, and, to wash off what is left of him, Sally offers to allow her caretaker to ride her. That is a remark of conscience. She feels guilt that she has not allowed him to ride her before, and now she wants to make up for that.

In "Someday," a fairytale telling computer (Bard) is kept in seclusion from what is going in the world. He keeps repeating to his master the things he knew before, so he is ridiculed and abused by the boys for his uselessness and for being dated. For the sake of experiment, Niccolo and Paul try to expand the Bard's "memory tape" by downloading an up-to-date book about

computers in to its mind (45). This book serves as the connection between Bard and the outside world, about what is going on in the field of computers. When Bard accidentally is turned on by one of the boys, he starts telling his own story of suffering with a voice that “carried a hint of passion in it, a trace of near feeling” (51). He ends with “the little computer knew then that computers would always grow wiser and more powerful until someday—someday—someday” (52). The dog, Sally, and Bard sense kindness and cruelty and know how to deal with them accordingly. Sally knows good from evil, and realizes that Raymond Gellhorn is evil while Jack is good. Bard’s years of oppression are almost over. He says in his story, “the little computer knew then that computers would always grow wiser and more powerful until someday – someday – someday” (52). The Bard knows that “someday” is near. Yet is “someday” a language of revenge (like that in R.U.R.⁵) — or is it the day man acknowledges the superiority of robots? “The Tercentenary Incident” tells the story of a robot identical in image and behavior to that of a fictitious future United States president, Hugo Allen Winkler. This robot finds that this president is a “vote-grabber, a promiser,” but that he failed to accomplish anything during his first term in office (232). So, this robot outfoxed the humans by vaporizing the real president using the disintegrator gun as he is ready to deliver his tercentenary speech. A moment later, the robot appears and tells them that he is the real president. What the robot killed was a device, a metaphorical robot in the guise of a president. This robot gives an outstanding speech; no one has ever heard a speech with such power and assurance. In this plot, the robot, in his calculation, is totally utilitarian. Though he hurts a human, he saves many. The story shows how much more potent and efficient he is than the real president. The secretary of the president implies in his conversation with Secret Service agent Lawrence Edwards that as long the job of human advancement is being done perfectly and efficiently, does it really matter if the president is a human or a machine?

Finally, “Reason” tells the story of an advanced model of robots called QT1. They are stationed in space to “to feed solar energy to the planets” (282). One of those robots, Cutie, shows “curiosity as to his own existence” (281). Echoing Descartes, he says, “I, myself, exist, because I think” (285). He refuses to believe

5 The utopian world displayed in Karel Capek’s play “R.U.R.” ends as an apocalyptic vision. Domin, the manager Rossum’s Universal Robots, explains that robots are going to be the new “Mudsill” class in everyday society (James Henry Hammond used this term in his 1858 speech titled “Mud Sill” arguing that in every society there must be a lowest class - slaves- performing the works that no other class is willing to perform). They can do any type of work more cheaply than man. They will produce vast quantities of food and goods, thus replacing human workers, and creating the conditions where humans can live in leisure and with enough time to spend towards their own advancement. Soon, however, robots become conscious of their existence and of their superiority to humans. They realize that they do all the work and the humans, their oppressors, are only parasites living off of their labor. They understand that the only way to freedom is by revolution and destroying mankind, considering humanity as an “enemy, and an outlaw in the universe” (34). They see their revolution as progress towards self-determination and independence from servitude. At this point, the revolting robots see a new beginning, “a new world has a- risen” (49). But by killing their creator, who knows “the secret of life,” they destroy themselves (53). This realization comes too late for a robot named Radius. Radius admits that only when robots are faced with their mortality do they become human. He says that they studied human history and wanted to be the new human beings, but one without human flaws.

in the existence of anything beyond the station. Powell, one of the two humans overseeing the robots, says “he is a skeptic. . . . He doesn’t believe we made him or that Earth exists or space or stars” (283). Cutie reasons that if he is a creation, the creator must be someone who is greater than he is. Thus he concludes that this station is his god, the creator. It created humans (Powell and Donovan) to serve it. But because the humans are obsolete, weak, inefficient and “makeshift,” the station – god – decided to create a superior being, QT1, to serve it (285). QT1 announces that he has become the Prophet of the Master and serves only the Master. He sees himself as the highest creation of the master and his goal is to guide the other robots to the “Truth” that “There is no Master but the Master and QT-1 is his prophet” (289). Cutie’s skepticism is founded on the fact that he is better at doing his job than the humans who pose as his masters in the station; he is flawless. In a sense, confronted with a sense of loss, Cutie tries to understand his world and finds assurance and comfort in appealing to a higher power, a power that is more powerful than him, the station. Throughout Asimov’s stories, robots evolve the way humans do. In the examples above, we see them evolve. First, there is the child toy (the dog and Bard). Second, we have a car with a positronic brain (Sally). Then there is the human servant that is aware of his superiority (the president). Finally, we see in “Reason” the creation of a new world order, the creation of a society, a belief system, a religion and a worship ritual in a world far away from ours. QT1 found that the cause of his existence is to become a prophet of god and converts all the robots in the station to his belief. Importantly, robots continuously show human emotions of love (the dog and Sally), sadness like the Bard. Interestingly, Cutie expresses an advanced human emotion like righteous indignation; it makes him angry when his god is blasphemed by Donovan. He also expresses gratitude for the human who have done their best to serve the station. He says “I really feel a sort of affection for you. You have served the Master well, and he will reward you for that” (291). Finally, Cutie expresses sadness when Donovan and Powell are about to leave the station. Cutie is capable to communicate this sentimentality to the humans as well. Powell recognizes his sadness as “sympathy” and Donovan recognizes his anger as “a sudden heightening of tension,” which suggests that these robots evolve to be recognized in some sense by human as equal.

Notably, this evolution parallels the end of Karel Capek’s play R.U.R. when the robots Primus and Helena develop human feelings. They love each other, as is evident in their dreams and willful sacrifice for each other. Primus dreams of Helena in his sleep and he speaks with her in a language he does not know, one of love and romance, and appreciation of beauty in the beloved: Helena sees in Primus the rising sun and the singing of the birds, and Primus sees these same things in Helena. Seeing that essential seed of humanity enables Alquist to identify them as humans. He compares them to Adam and Eve; they offer a new beginning, another step of evolution towards progress, in the sense that the future will always be better than the past. In these stories, robots evolve to be human without human fallacies and helplessness.

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Dr.Majed S Al-Lehaibi
Studies in Literature Scholar
Cultural Mission of Saudi Arabia (SACM)
Fairfax, VA, United States of America