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9. Book Review: Herrink, M. (2019). A Compassionate Guide for Social Robots. E3 Publishing.

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This textbook, genre bending, is truly eclectic and spellbinding. Its author has amassed considerable experience and a plethora of academic publications and research in the arena of social robots in care settings stretching back to 2006. It represents a structure best characterised as a confluence of conventional novella augmented by an extraordinary excavation of learnings the author has accumulated over a lifetime of high-quality teaching and research observing social robot-human interactions by way of detailed guidance and advice notes.

Not to overstate, but this book could easily be appropriated by the Socratic dialogic philosophical tradition. On the one hand, the book is a novella love story set in an Italian town involving a computer programmer (Alesandro) with a penchant for writing algorithms who has invented a social robot (Essy) on the way to realising its own Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). On the other, it is a profoundly thoughtful and intersectional treatise that draws upon social and public policy discourses, behavioural psychology, philosophy, science fiction and robotics in enunciating the basis of a possible future social contract capable of navigating future human-social robot interactions and relationships.

The text is composed of 19 exotically titled chapters. Here is a flavour: “On the Peculiarity of People;” “The Elusiveness of the Soul;” “Why Robots Can’t Truly Kiss.” Cleverly, the reader is left to interpret whether the book is narrated by an existing social robot directed at the learning needs of future fellow social robots and their understanding of human behaviours and needs and, simultaneously, affords 21st Century human readers the opportunity to reflect on what it *means to be human* in world increasingly complicated and augmented by AI (Artificial Intelligence) and robots. To this end, through a series of contextualised case studies, the reader is introduced to several situations in which the author draws upon his experience of introducing and observing human-robot interactions in various care settings, predominantly elder care and those involving children with learning difficulties. Through a process of Socratic dialogues, our future social robot is sensitised to the complex constructions of humanness: namely our ability to trust, love, forge relationships, be compassionate, express humour, suspend disbelief, experience fear, exercise violence and be possessed on a *soul*. Humans are complex. The following passage best summarises how our social robot philosopher *comprehends* humans:

> you can easily be manipulated into doing things that many people do not like. You can be used for a bank robbery or even a murder. And you could also be used to attack people and start wars. Even then, it is not up to you. You cannot help it that you are what you are. But people are not always aware of that. Perhaps you have noticed that I have told you a lot about humans, and mostly, this concerned things that are unnecessarily complicated, sometimes incomprehensible, and in any case, far from logical. They may be fascinating, but their complexity doesn’t make it easy for you to be of service to them especially if they sometimes don’t appreciate your service (p.118).

In keeping with the Socratic dialogic leanings, the author invokes Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (Book VII of *The Republic*) in a chapter titled “Enchanted Cave.” Our social robot is advised: “…who knows, maybe an artificial intelligence like yours could show us the way to a happier cave – or even a way out of it. Perhaps one day you’ll tell us what’s outside our cramped cave and have us realize how distorted our view has been all this time” (p. 74). In

addition to Plato, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Kant, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are name checked.

This text also draws upon science fiction representations of our myriad futures, particularly cinematic and TV contributions. The conflation of science fiction and social robotics is a bourgeoning research space. The futures integration of social robots into society is critically evaluated through several recent studies including Sandoval, Mubin, & Obaid (2014), Teo (2021), Osawa et al. (2022), Henschel, Laban, and Cross (2021), and Singh (2021). These works collectively examine the intersection between science fiction representations and the practical applications of robotics. This research highlights the substantial influence of science fiction on public expectations and the development of technology, and this is precisely the lens that Heerink adopts in sensitising readers to possible future deployments of social robots.

Quite apart from the creative, inventive, and truly imaginative ways in which the author introduces and advances our awareness of current and possible future deployments of social robots, the needs of pedagogues are also amply catered for. To this end, woven within case studies are vignettes the author generously shares on his highly original and student-centred teaching and learning strategies involving the use of social robots and the ways in which students can be encouraged to grasp the challenges and opportunities futures envisioning facilitates including the use of simulations.

In addition to highly recommending the written version of this offering, purchasers can also avail of a few YouTube videos in which key issues and themes are expanded on further by the author with the use of animated videos.

This book ought to be compulsory reading on programmes of study leading to awards in AI and social robotics, welfare technology and health and social care.

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