Book review

Robot Theology: Old Questions through New Media

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Joshua K. Smith's *Robot Theology: Old Questions Through New Media* (2022) introduces readers to a variety of issues that surround artificial intelligence (AI) and robots, and analyses these issues through the lens of Christian theology. Smith notes that few Christian and religious scholars are taking part in the discourse that surrounds these topics. The book is, therefore, a solid contribution to the interdisciplinary study of AI and robots. However, more than this, the intention behind the book is also an attempt to join the larger debate of how we can create a better future in an ever-changing world, as it relates to the integration of AI and robots into our daily lives. As Smith notes, "Participation in this discussion is not simply about interdisciplinary study, but about ensuring human and planetary flourishing for our great-grandchildren. The world is in an economic and ethical crisis, and it is our Christian obligation and joy to serve however we can in the days ahead" (pg. 4). Although aimed at a Christian audience, human and planetary flourishing is in everyone's interests. Therefore, the book also has wider appeal to those generally interested in ethical issues that arise in relation AI and robots. It is specifically through the lens of a more general philosophical reader, with an interest in robot and AI ethics, that I read Smith's book, and review his discussions and arguments.

Smith discusses an array of relevant ethical and metaphysical issues surrounding AI and robots. Topics discussed include questions of personhood and moral consideration, the robot rights debate, friendship and companionship with robots, and race, race theory and the metaphysics of race as it relates to AI and robots. These are topical themes within the field of robot and AI ethics. *Robot Theology*, therefore, slots itself well into the already existing literature.

In *Chapter 1*, before directly grappling with the abovementioned issues, Smith, from a theological perspective, provides an interesting discussion about the human fascination with creating automata, AI, and robots, and how it relates to the psychological struggle humans have with wanting to create technology that allows us to overcome human limitations and finiteness. I particularly enjoyed this chapter. Here, Smith also importantly clarifies what is meant by "AI" and "robots" which, although common terms, can mean different things depending on who defines them. This lays a good foundation for thinking about issues that arise in relation to AI and robots.

Chapter 2 introduces readers to the world of robot ethics. Here, Smith brings to light some ethical issues that he feels particularly require theological attention, and how Christians can contribute to the discussion of these issues. The issues examined include responsibility, privacy, ecology, and encoding morality. He does not go into great detail discussing these issues, since the rest of the book is dedicated to doing so. However, it gives a good overview of existing debates and relevant literature.

From *Chapter 3* onwards, Smith dedicates singular chapters to a particular metaphysical or ethical issue, namely personhood and moral consideration, the robot rights debate, friendship and companionship with robots, and race and racism, as mentioned above. This allows for more detailed examination of the issues at hand.

Starting with personhood and moral patiency in *Chapter 3*, Smith introduces readers to the biblical notion of personhood. Smith argues that the concept of personhood can include robots, thus broadening our understanding of the concept of personhood itself. In thinking about the possibility of robot personhood, the discussion naturally flows to thoughts about robot moral patiency. Moral patiency pertains to having the capacity to be the target of right or wrong actions, and experience harm or benefit from these actions. In light of this definition, can robots be moral patients? Should humans treat them morally well? Smith argues in the affirmative, putting forward a few reasons for why it is important that we consider robots as moral patients. Two reasons that stand out include that, firstly, it decenters our old ideas of moral patiency. Smith argues that this is a good thing because it allows for progressive thinking in ethics and theology, thus improving upon these respective fields. Secondly, a robot can be a medium of virtue and vice, because how we treat them could impact our own morality. Since we want this technology to be beneficial, and we want to create a better future for ourselves and future generations, it is clear that we should really aim to achieve virtue in the context of our interactions with robots.

Thinking about robot moral patiency lays a good foundation for Smith's thoughts on the robot rights debate in *Chapter 4*. Smith provides an interesting discussion about the law and how it relates to robots, writing about concepts such as responsibility (who is held responsible if a robot harms someone) and rights that could protect robots from human harm. The latter is interesting and philosophically complex, and relates well to Smith's discussion about robot moral patiency. Smith agrees that robots could have rights that prevent them from being mistreated but argues that such rights should be granted to robots not for the sake of robots themselves, but for the sake of humans. This relates to Smith's standpoint that a robot can be a medium of virtue and vice, and that we should achieve virtue by treating robots morally well.

In *Chapter 5*, Smith goes on to discuss the topic of friendship and companionship with robots. Smith contends that we should not be too quick to dispel the possibility of being friends with a robot. However, Smith questions that although we can be friends with robots, this does not necessarily mean we should be. I particularly enjoyed this distinction between can and should, since it allowed for interesting and nuanced consideration of the topic at hand. Smith provides clear discussion about the costs and benefits of robotic friendship. Given the very real risks associated with robot friendship (such as concerns about deception, manipulation, and data privacy) Smith highlights that thinking carefully about the design of robots, as well as how consumers use this technology, can help ensure that robotic friendship is good for us. Therefore, we can be friends with robots, and there is nothing necessarily wrong with buying a robot with which we intend to be friends. However, it is important to be aware of the context of the robotic friendship, and the positive and negative impacts that may arise in this context of robotic friendship.

The last major ethical issue with which Smith grapples is that of race and racism in the context of AI and robots. In *Chapter 6*, Smith introduces the reader to a biblical-theological understanding of race, discussing how the biblical narrative has been whitewashed due to misinterpretations of biblical texts. Smith argues that such a narrative must be rejected and reconciled; we must see beauty in diversity, and understand and appreciate others unlike ourselves. Following this, Smith goes on to discuss the topic of algorithmic bias. Smith draws the reader's attention to the very real and current issues surrounding race and racism, and how these issues continue to rear their ugly heads in the context of AI and robots. Smith leaves us with the question: "Do we really want the current understandings and problems of race and racism to be embodied in robots?" (pg. 116). Thus, the important takeaway is that we must be aware of these issues, so that we can avoid them in the future. This speaks clearly to the book's intention of contributing to the discussion of how we can ensure human and planetary flourishing for future generations.

Finally, Smith's last chapter (*Chapter 7*) looks at the implications of robots for the church in particular. Although this chapter is more context specific, it is just one example of an area where there is potential for robots to substitute human beings. It thus also adds a different perspective to the more general philosophical discussion about robots replacing human beings, and the risks and benefits thereof.

As previously mentioned, this review is written from the perspective of a philosopher working in the field of ethics of technology, who has had little, if any, real exposure to theology as a field of study. As such, the analysis here of Smith's book considers what philosophers interested in AI and robot ethics, in particular, may take away from the book.

Before delving into different discussions of issues related to AI and robots from a theological perspective, Smith first introduces readers to these issues, and related concepts, as they are related to Christian theology. This is intended to provide clarity of concepts and issues before they are applied to AI and robots. Although beneficial to those readers who are not as familiar with Christian theology, these sections may seem less appealing to a wider philosophical audience, who may be eager to delve more quickly into the issues as they relate directly to robots. Interestingly, though, when reading the sections that then aimed to apply theological discourse to issues surrounding AI and robots, I found myself forgetting that this book was indeed written from a theological lens. In some instances, it felt I was reading a more general book on AI and robot ethics. As a philosopher reading the book, however, this was not necessarily an issue for me as I enjoyed Smith's well researched discussions that engaged well with relevant philosophical literature. However, at least for me, the theological lens was not always very clear.

Smith engages well with prominent researchers in the fields of robot ethics and ethics of AI. It is, therefore, a good introduction for those interested in issues related to AI and robots from a philosophical perspective. The writing is accessible, which also makes for a good introduction to the issues that Smith discusses. I particularly appreciated Smith's use of examples of current robots, and news stories involving these robots, that were scattered throughout the text. Such examples and news stories highlight the relevance of Smith's arguments and the importance of his work. Additionally, it ensures that the book remains grounded in that it does not get too carried away with focusing too much on future technological possibilities of robotic development. After all, Smith notes his concern about those who feel that some of the ethical issues that arise in this book are not a "now" problem, about which we should be imminently concerned. Thus, the book makes it very clear that we should indeed pay attention to these very real issues that are occurring here and now. Such a message is relevant not only to Christians and Christian theologians, but to a wider audience.

Overall, I enjoyed Smith's book. Perhaps it is more relevant for those particularly interested in approaching the topic of AI and robots from a theological perspective. However, it does have much to offer a more general audience by way of introducing important issues that surround AI and robots. This, however, is possibly more beneficial for those less familiar with literature on AI and robot ethics. However, that being said, for those more familiar with the literature, it is interesting to see well-known ethical discussions in conversation with biblical perspectives, as it does, in some instances, cast a new light on well-known debates.