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Rethinking the I-You relation through dialogical philosophy in the Ethics of AI and robotics

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1 Introduction

When I embarked on organizing a special issue for AI and society, I thought it was the perfect place to showcase the philosophical work of Martin Buber and his seminal work *I and Thou* (Buber 1937) in reference to developments in relational robotics and AI. In technological circles today terms such as 'social' no longer mean relating with another person face to face, but now it can be done sitting alone at a computer. Social interaction then has moved away from the embodied experience in time and space to a disconnected experience mediated by machines. Machine mediated-communication draws on its antecedents of mediating communication by mail or telephones, which do not require the persons engaging in the communication to be present in the same physical space. Telephones could transport voices that give users an experience of direct communication, though it is a disembodied voice. Online chat allows instant mail to be sent and received, giving conversations the quality of real-time though bodies are not present with each other. The senders and recipients of messages are having a direct experience of interacting with each other through a machine.

Now what if robotic and AI scientists could remove the need for another person altogether? What if the machine could become a *direct-object* of the interaction? With social robots and the rise of chatbots we are entering an era where machines are playing different roles in our lives, as an 'other' perhaps. But if the machine can become another,

what does it say for how robotic and AI scientists conceptualise 'relationship'? Is relationship instrumental? Is relationship mutual and reciprocal? There are many different kinds of relationships that people have. Our market economies structure work so that encounters between people in the work sphere take on a character of formal interactions 'just a bottle of water please', 'I'm calling about my electricity bill', or 'can I buy £300 worth of Euros'. These formal interactions characterize a huge proportion of our lived experience. Some philosophers have characterised these types of relations between persons as 'instrumental'. If these kinds of relations are 'instrumental' does that make people in the situations 'instruments' or 'tools'? Humans are never tools or instruments, even if relations between people take on a formal character. When we meet a cashier at a checkout or restaurant service staff, they have not stopped being human just because they are only expressing themselves formally in the given situation. People do not stop being human and turn into instruments when they enter the working environment, and then switch back to being human in the private sphere. In every encounter we meet each other as persons, members of a common humanity. Is it possible to acknowledge this reality, but still meet another as a Thou? As a non-instrument?

2 I and Thou

We offer in this special issue a new approach to robotics and AI by introducing the theories of Martin Buber and dialogical philosophy. Martin Buber was an Austrian born Israeli Jewish philosopher and his important publications included *I and Thou* (1937 [1923]), *Dialogue* (1929) and *Between Man and Man* (1947). We begin this special volume with a contribution by Stawarska (*Primacy of I-you*

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connectedness revisited: some implications for AI and robotics) outlines the dialogical tradition as a theoretical counterpoint to ego centric traditions in Western philosophy 'Modernity thus initiated an *egocentric tradition*, and its commitment to the conception of humanity as a collective of lone individuals' (this volume p. X). The impact of this ego centric tradition can still be seen today, particularly in relation to how relationships are construed instrumentally in robotics and AI research, a theme picked up and developed in different ways by the authors. While Stawarska is optimistic about the potential of developing I-Thou relations with robotic and AI artefacts, Trausan-Matu takes a different approach challenging the concept that it will ever be possible to 'establish an I-Thou relation between a human and an artificial agent' in his paper *It is possible to grow an I-Thou relation with an artificial agent? A dialogistic perspective*. Trausan-Matus invites us to consider this from drawing on the work of the dialogical philosophy of Mikhail Bakhin's 'mulitivocality and polyphony'. We then move away from the potential of a machine to become a relational other to presenting the case for why dialogue must come before logic, and the need, the absolute necessity to incorporate dialogical philosophy into contemporary analysis of robotics. The paper *why being dialogical must come before being logical—the need for a hermeneutical-dialogical approach to robotic activities* by Shotter asserts the importance of living bodies in relation with each other creates the foundations for shaping and organizing our environment.

It is with great sadness that I report the death of Professor John Shotter. It was an honour to have him participate in this special issue and to be an important advocate of the dialogical model. I would like to thank Cherrie Ravello who gave her kind permission to include this paper in our special issue. Professor Shotter is immortalised in these words and his commitment to dialogue will continue on.

The paper by Kizel offers some extraordinary insights into the lifeworlds of teenagers and how they negotiate their complex social lives on and offline. What is engaging about Arie's paper *I-Thou Dialogical Encounters in Adolescents' WhatsApp Virtual Communities* is the conflicts that young people experience in their day to day interactions and how WhatsApp allows them a different kind of freedom to engage with others. The technology then may provide a vehicle in which people get to experience I-Thou. One might ask if this is really I-Thou relating if it is not embodied and present or cannot be reproduced in offline encounters? We then go onto to explore the role of fiction in Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909) by Zimmermann and Morgan (this volume) refers to a dystopian tale characterized by dehumanization. We have lost the sense of the term 'dehumanisation' in today's narratives of robotics and AI. The technologists have gained the upper hand and

recast those who speak of such problems with technologies as modern Luddites. Those who talk of dehumanization must still have a sense of the human (which is not roundly defended by many academics), and also to describe the impacts of technologies that produce a process of becoming less than human. As I write this from Leicester in the United Kingdom, I am reminded that the Luddites were popular in this local area. The term Luddites come from the namesake of Ted Ludd (1799), born in Anstey in Leicestershire who famously broke two machines. He captured the feeling of the moment and his acts spread across the Midlands to Nottingham and then inspired the nineteenth century reaction by textile workers against new machinery introduced during the Industrial Revolution. We then move from these themes to an exploration of how the other is constructed 'I in an other's eye'—what kind of other is seen inside the self? A topic explore in this volume by Dix, who takes us through the potentials and limitations of the Theory of Mind model. The main papers conclude with my paper (Richardson) *The Human Relationship in the Ethics of Robotics: A call to Martin Buber's I and Thou*. I ask the question—what is the model of relationship that is used by robotic researchers when they are developing their relational bots.

We include in this volume two Open Forum pieces. The first is by Nicole Dewandre *Humans as relational selves*. This piece is extremely dialogical because it was the text that was presented during a Tedx Talk in Brussels. I thought including a spoken talk in a special issue of dialogical philosophy would be very fitting. After all, our textual words are articulated in other ways, through speech, listening, thinking, writing and editing. Here is an opportunity to experience Dewandre's talk in both forms—her excellent Tedx Talk acts as mirrored compliment. Finally Cathrine Hasse's *The Vitruvian Robot* invites us to enjoy and engage in the multiplicity of the robot—taking the term 'Vitruvian Man' a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci where man is represented as architectural form—the human is represented in robot form. Finally, our book review is dedicated to the work of Gill (2015) *Tacit Engagement: Beyond Interaction* a fitting conclusion to the special issue. The clue is in the title, Beyond Interaction—how do we move away from the dominant narrative that relations between people are merely a mechanical exchange of services?

I would like to conclude this editorial with a tribute to John Shotter as it captures the spirit of this special issue, to celebrate and value the role we have in each other's lives. He writes (this volume): Descartes (1968) aim of "making ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature" (p. 78), forgets our larger task of our making and sustaining ourselves as human beings-as doing together, in dialog with each other, what we cannot do alone'.