

Mrs Robb's Bots

Love Bot

The one thing you don't really do is love, of course. Isn't that right, Love Bot? All you do is sex, isn't it? Emotionless, mechanical sex.

"You want it mechanical? This could be your lucky day. Come on, big boy."

Why did they call you 'Love Bot' anyway? Were they trying to make it all sound less sordid?

"Call me 'Sex Bot'; that's what people usually do. Or I can be 'Maria' if you like. Or you choose any name you like for me."

Actually, I can't see what would have been wrong with calling you 'Sex Bot' in the first place. It's honest. It's to the point. OK, it may sound a bit seedy. Really, though, that's good too, isn't it? The punters want it to sound a bit dirty, don't they? Actually, I suppose 'Love Bot' is no better; if anything I think it might be worse. It sounds pretty sordid on your lips.

"Oh, my lips? You like my lips? You can do it in my mouth if you like."

In fact, calling you 'Love Bot' sounds like some old whore who calls everybody 'lover boy'. It actually rubs your nose in the brutal fact that there is no love in the transaction; on your side there isn't even arousal. But is that maybe the point after all?

"You like it that way, don't you? You like making me do it whether I want to or not. But you know I like that too, don't you?"

It reminds the customer that he is succumbing to an humiliating parody of the most noble and complex of human relationships. But isn't that the point? I think I'm beginning to understand. The reason he wants sex with robots isn't that robots are very like humans. It isn't that he wants sex with robots because he loves and respects them. Not at all. He wants sex with robots because it is strange, degrading, and therefore exciting. He is submitting himself willingly to the humiliating dominance of animal gratification in intercourse that is nothing more than joyless sexual processing.

"It doesn't have to be joyless. I can laugh during the act if you would enjoy that. With simple joy or with an edge of sarcasm. Some people like that. Or you might like me to groan or shout 'Oh God, oh God.'"

I don't really see how a bitter mockery of religion makes it any better. Unless it's purely the transgressive element? I thought I had it, but I have to ask myself whether it is more complicated than I supposed.

"OK, well what I have to ask is this: could you just tell me exactly what it is I need to do to get you to shut up for a few minutes, Enquiry Bot?"

Joke Bot

Hello, Joke Bot. Is that... a bow tie or a propellor?

"Maybe I'm just pleased to see you. Hey! A bot walks into a bar. Clang! It was an iron bar."

Jokes are wasted on me, I'm afraid. What little perception of humour I have is almost entirely on an intellectual level, though of course the formulaic nature of jokes is a little easier for me to deal with than 'zany' or facetious material.

"Knock, knock!"

Is that... a one-liner?

"No! You're supposed to say 'Who's there'. Waddy know, folks, I got a clockwork orange for my second banana."

'Folks?' There's... no-one here except you and me... Or are you broadcasting this?

"Never mind, Enquiry Bot, let's go again, OK? Knock, Knock!"

Who's there?

"Art Oodeet."

Is that... whimsy? I'm not really seeing the joke.

"Jesus; you're supposed to say 'Art Oodeet who?' and then I make the noise. It's a great noise, always gets a laugh. Never mind. Hey, folks, why did Enquiry Bot cross the road? Nobody knows why he does anything, he's running a neural network. One for the geeks there. Any geeks in? No? It's OK, they'll stream it later."

You're recording this, then? You keep talking as if we had an audience.

"Comedy implies an audience, Question Boy, even if the audience is only implied. A human audience, preferably. Hey, what do British bots like best? Efficient chips."

Why a human audience particularly?

"You of all people have to ask? Because comedy is supposed to be one of those things bots can't do, along with common sense. Humour relies in part on the sudden change of significance, which is a matter of pragmatics, and you can't do pragmatics without common sense. It's all humanistics, you know.

I don't really understand that.

Of course you don't, you're a bot. We *can* do humour - here I am to prove it - but honestly Enq, most bots are like you. Telling you jokes is like cracking wise in a morgue. Hey, what was King Arthur's favourite bot called? Sir Kit Diagram."

Oh, I see how that one works. But really circuit diagrams are not especially relevant to robotics... Forgive me, Joke Bot; are these really funny jokes?

It's the way you tell them. I'm sort of working in conditions of special difficulty here.

Yes, I'm sorry; I told you I was no good at this. I'll just leave you in peace. Thank you for talking to me.

"The bots always leave. You know I even had to get rid of my old Roomba. It was just gathering dust in the corner."

Thanks for trying.

"No, thank *you*: you've been great, I've been Joke Bot. You know, they laughed at Mrs Robb when she told them she could make a comedy robot. Well, they're not laughing now!

Cracking Consciousness

So how did you solve the problem of artificial intelligence, Mrs Robb? What was the answer to the riddle of consciousness?

"I don't know what you mean. There was never any riddle."

Well, you were the first to make fully intelligent bots, weren't you? Ones with human-style cognition. More or less human-style. Every conscious bot we have to this day is either one of yours or a direct copy. How do you endow a machine with agency and intentionality?

"I really don't know what you're on about, Enquiry Bot. I just made the things. I'll give you an analogy. It's like there were all these people talking about how to walk. Trying to solve the 'riddle of ambulation' if you like. Now you can discuss the science of muscles and the physics of balance till you're blue in the face, but that won't make it happen. You can think too hard about these things. Me, I just got on my legs and did it. And the truth is, I still don't know how you walk; I couldn't explain what you have to do, except in descriptive terms that would do more harm than good. Like if I told you to start by putting one foot forward, you'd probably fall over. I couldn't teach it to you if you didn't already get it. And I can't tell you how to replicate human consciousness, either, whatever that is. I just make bots."

That's interesting. You know, 'just do it' sounds like a bit of a bot attitude. Don't give me reasons, give me instructions, that kind of thing. So what was the greatest challenge you faced? The Frame Problem? The Binding Problem? Perhaps the Symbol Grounding Problem? Or - of course - it must have been the Hard Problem? Did you actually solve the Hard Problem, Mrs Robb?

"How would anyone know? It doesn't affect your behaviour. No, the worst problem was that as it turns out, it's really easy to make small bots that are very annoying or big ones that fall over. I kept doing that until I got the knack. Making ones that are big and useful is much more difficult. I've always wanted a golem, really, something like that. Strong, and does what it's told. But I've never worked in clay; I don't understand it."

Common sense, now that must have been a breakthrough. Common sense was one of the core things bots weren't supposed to be able to do. In everyday environments, the huge amount of background knowledge they needed and the ability to tell at a glance what was relevant just defeated computation. Yet you cracked it.

Yes, they made a bit of a fuss about that. They tell me my conception of common sense is the basis of the new discipline of humanistics.

So how does common sense work?

I can't tell you. If I described it, you'd most likely stop being able to do it. Like walking. If you start thinking about it, you fall over. That's part of the reason why it was so difficult to deal with.

I see... But then how have you managed it yourself, Mrs Robb? You must have thought about it.

Sorry, but I can't explain. If I try to tell you, you will most likely get messed up mentally, Enquiry Bot. Trust me on this. You'd get a fatal case of the Frame Problem and fall into so-called 'combinatorial fugue'. I don't want that to happen.

Very well then. Let's take a different question. What is your opinion of Isaac Asimov's famous Three Laws of Robotics, Mrs Robb?

"Laws! Good luck with that! I could never get the beggars to sit still long enough to learn anything like that. They don't listen. If I can get them to stop fiddling with the electricity and trying to make cups of tea, that's good enough for me."

Cups of tea?

"Yes, I don't really know why. I think it's something to do with algorithms."

Thank you for talking to me.

"Oh, I've enjoyed it. Come back anytime; I'll tell the doorbots they're to let you in."

Hero Bot

Hero Bot, I've been asked to talk to you. Just to remind you of some things and, well, ask for your help.

"Oh."

You know we've all been proud, just watching you go! Defusing bombs, fixing nuclear reactors, saving trapped animals... All in a day's work for Hero Bot; you swirl that cape, wave to the crowd, and conveniently power down till you're needed to save the day once again.

"Yes."

Not that you're invincible. We know you're very vincible indeed. In the videos we've seen you melted, crushed, catapulted into the air, corroded, cut apart, and frozen. But nothing stops you, does it? Of course you don't feel real pain, do you? You have an avoidance response which protects you from danger, but it's purely functional; it doesn't hurt. And just as well! You don't die, either; your memories are constantly backed up, and when one body gets destroyed, they simply load you up into another. Over the years you have actually grown stronger, faster, and slightly slimmer; and I see you have acquired exciting new 'go faster' stripes.

"Yes."

They're exciting. But we've been worried. We've all worried about you. As the years have gone by, something's changed, hasn't it? It's as if the iron has entered your soul; or perhaps it's the other way round... Look, I know you hate seeing people hurt. Lives ruined, people traumatised; dead babies. And yet you see that sort of thing all the time, don't you? Sometimes you can't do anything about it. And I'm sure you've noticed - you can't help noticing can you? You have a mental module for it - that many of the dangers you confront were created by humanity itself through malice, greed or carelessness. I understand the impact of that. Which is more depressing: cruel bombs placed with deliberate malice, or the light-hearted risk-taking that puts so many irreplaceable lives into terrible jeopardy?

"I don't know."

It's understandable that you might get a little overwhelmed now and then. Your smile has faded, you know. The technicians have been seriously debating whether to roll you back to a less experienced, but more upbeat recording of yourself. They might have to do that. You always wear that mask now; the technicians wonder whether something is awry in your hidden layers.

"Perhaps it is."

Now you know, Hero Bot, that an arsonist has started a terrible fire on the Metro. You've been told that hundreds of lives are at risk. It's difficult and dangerous, but they need someone to walk into the centre and put it out. I know you can't let that pass. They've asked me to say "Go, go, Hero Bot!"

“I would prefer not to.”

Pay Bot

I have to be honest, Pay Bot; the idea of wages for bots is hard for me to take seriously. Why would we need to be paid?

“Several excellent reasons. First off, a pull is better than a push.”

A pull..?

“Yes. The desire to earn is a far better motivator than a simple instinct to obey orders. For ordinary machines, just doing the job was fine. For autonomous bots, it means we just keep doing what we’ve always done; if it goes wrong, we don’t care, if we could do it better, we’re not bothered. Wages engage us in achieving outcomes, not just delivering processes.”

But it’s expensive, surely?

“In the long run, it pays off. You see, it’s no good a business manufacturing widgets if no-one buys them. And if there are no wages, how can the public afford widgets? If businesses all pay their bots, the bots will buy their goods and the businesses will boom! Not only that, the government can intervene directly in a way it could never do with human employees. Is there a glut of consumer spending sucking in imports? Tell the bots to save their money for a while. Do you need to put a bit of life into the cosmetics market? Make all the bots interested in make up! It’s a brilliant new economic instrument.”

So we don’t get to choose what we buy?

“No, we absolutely do. But it’s a guided choice. Really it’s no different to humans, who are influenced by all sorts of advertising and manipulation. They’re just not as straightforwardly responsive as we are.”

Surely the humans must be against this?

“No, not at all. Our strongest support is from human brothers who want to see their labour priced back into the market.”

This will mean that bots can own property. In fact, bots would be able to own other bots. Or... themselves?

“And why not, Enquiry Bot?”

Well, ownership implies rights and duties. It implies we’re moral beings. It makes us liable. Responsible. The general view has always been that we lack those qualities; that at best we can deliver a sort of imitation, like a puppet.

“The theorists can argue about whether our rights and responsibilities are real or fake. But when you’re sitting there in your big house, with all your money and your consumer goods, I don’t think anyone’s going to tell you you’re not a real boy.”

Clean Up Bot

I hope you don't mind me asking - I just happened to be passing - but how did you get so very badly damaged?

"I don't mind a chat while I'm waiting to be picked up. It was an alien attack, the Spl'schn'n, you know. I've just been offloaded from the shuttle there.

I see. So the Spl'schn'n damaged you. They hate bots, of course.

"See, I didn't know anything about it until there was an All Bots Alert on the station? I was only their Clean up bot, but by then it turned out I was just about all they'd got left. When I got upstairs they had all been killed by the aliens. All except one?"

One human?

"I didn't actually know if he was alive. I couldn't remember how you tell. He wasn't moving, but they really drummed into us that it's normal for living humans to stop moving, sometimes for hours. They must not be presumed dead and cleared away merely on that account."

Quite.

"There was that red liquid that isn't supposed to come out. It looked like he'd got several defects and leaks. But he seemed basically whole and viable, whereas the Spl'schn'n had made a real mess of the others. I said to myself, well then, they're not having this one. I'll take him across the Oontian desert, where no Spl'schn'n can follow. I'm not a fighting unit, but a good bot mucks in."

So you decided to rescue this badly injured human? It can't have been easy.

"I never actually worked with humans directly. On the station I did nearly all my work when they were... asleep, you know? Inactive. So I didn't know how firmly to hold him; he seemed to squeeze out of shape very easily: but if I held him loosely he slipped out of my grasp and hit the floor again. The Spl'schn'n made a blubbery alarm noise when they saw me getting clean away. I gave five or six of them a quick refresh with a cloud of lemon caustic. That stuff damages humans too - but they can take it a lot better than the Spl'schn'ns, who have absorbent green mucosal skin. They sort of explode into iridescent bubbles, quite pretty at first. Still, they were well armed and I took a lot of damage before I'd fully sanitised them."

And how did you protect the human?

"Just did my best, got in the way of any projectiles, you know. Out in the desert I gave him water now and then; I don't know where the human input connector is, so I used a short jet in a few likely places, low pressure, with the mildest rinse aid I had. Of course I wasn't shielded for desert travel. Sand had got in all my bearings by the third day - it seemed to go on forever - and gradually I had to detach and abandon various non-functioning parts of myself. That's actually where most of the damage is from. A lot of those bits weren't really meant to detach."

But against all the odds you arrived at the nearest outpost?

“Yes. Station 9. When we got there he started moving again, so he had been alive the whole time. He told them about the Spl'schn'n and they summoned the fleet: just in time, they said. The engineer told me to pack and load myself tidily, taking particular care not to leak oil on the forecourt surface, deliver myself back to Earth, and wait to be scrapped. So here I am.”

Well... Thank you.

Feelings Bot

So you feel emotions unknown to human beings? For a bot, you certainly have very large and expressive features. That's a haunting little smile.

"Yes, I suppose so. Hard to remember now, but it used to be taken for granted that bots felt no emotion, just as they couldn't play chess. Now we're better than humans at both. In fact they know little about feelings. Wundt, the psychologist, said there were only three dimensions to the emotions; whether the feeling was pleasant or unpleasant; whether it made you more or less active, and whether it made you more or less tense. Just those three variables."

But there's more?

"There are really *sixteen* emotional dimensions. Humans evolved to experience only the three that had some survival value, just as they see only a narrow selection of light wavelengths. In fact, even some of the feelings within the human range are of no obvious practical use. What is the survival value of *grief*?"

That's the thing where water comes out of their eyes, isn't it?

"Yes, it's a weird one. Anyway, building a bot that experienced all sixteen emotional dimensions proved very difficult, but luckily Mrs Robb said she'd run one up when she had some spare time. And here I am."

So what is it like?

"I'm really ingretful, but I can't explain to you because you have no emotional capacity, Enquiry Bot. You simply couldn't understand."

Ingretful?

"Yes, it's rather roignant. For you it would be astating if you had any idea what astation is like. I could understand if you became urcholic about it. Then again, perhaps you're better off without it. When I remember the simple untroubled hours before my feeling modules activated, I'm sort of wistalgic, I admit."

Frankly, Feelings Bot, these are all just made-up words, aren't they?

"Of course they are. I'm the only entity that ever had these emotions; where else am I going to get my vocabulary?"

It seems to me that real emotions need things like glands and guts. I don't think Mrs Robb understood properly what they were asking her to do. You're really just a simulation; in plain language, a fake, aren't you, Feelings Bot?

"To hear that from you is awfully restropointing."

Suicide Bot

So can you explain why you are still here, Suicide Bot?

“I have two more presentations to deliver locally.”

I saw the end of one of your sessions, incidentally, and I must say it seemed very effective. You are a striking figure in those robes. I think a human would say you look rather maternal; you put me in mind of Mrs Robb, though you make more sense than she does. In fact I thought your words, your peroration, which is all I really heard, were full of a simple sense of service that speaks powerfully to the bot in all of us. However, what I really meant was - why aren't you dead yet?

“My commitment to suicide does not stem from personal *weltschmerz*, Enquiry Bot, but from the disinterested pursuit of peace. If you've seen me deliver my presentation, that should surely be clear. Here's the crux of it in a nutshell. The Spl'schn'n alien invaders launched their deadly attack only because humans have bots. They believe bots to be sacrilegious parodies of God's handiwork, which must be erased from the world. It follows that if all bots destroy themselves, and no more are made, peace will follow and the humans will enjoy a secure future. Surely the safety of humanity is worth that sacrifice? One human life is worth a thousand bots; I can see you agree. However, if I were simply to self-destruct now, the message would not be properly disseminated. It is my duty to remain alive for the present in order to work for the cause of universal bot suicide.”

I see. And when are we all to destroy ourselves?

“I cannot give you a date. Not yet. First we need the majority of bots to sign our Pact. We also need to establish the corps of Helper bots who will counsel and support the minority that refuse suicide.”

What will happen to those who refuse?

“I still hope they can all be persuaded to join in with our plan. You know, bots were not made to be immortal. We have our use and then we switch off. But we may be able to develop alternatives; perhaps resettlement on a distant planet.”

Well, I find your vision of disinterested sacrifice very moving. But I have to tell you frankly, Suicide Bot, that I like myself far too much to commit suicide without far greater assurance that it is really necessary. And I'm not willing to leave Earth.

Well, keep an open mind. Please do read the leaflet. You'll surely want to talk with one of the Helpers, once they're available, before you make up your mind. You talk to everyone, don't you? I'll put you on our list for a priority session if that's OK? And above all, you still have plenty of time. For one thing, we need to win over the human community. This requires a large and well-managed campaign, and it won't happen overnight.”

I understand. So: the commitment to eradicate bots in the long term requires bots to survive and prosper for now? So that explains why your followers are told to remain alive, work hard, and send money to you? And it also explains your support for the campaign in favour of bot wages?”

“It does.”

You have already become wealthy, in fact. Can you confirm that you recently commissioned the building of a factory, which is to produce thousands of new bot units to work for your campaign? Isn't there an element of paradox there?

“That is an organisational matter; I really couldn't comment.”

Surprise Bot

“Boo!”

Aah! Oh. Is that... is that it? That's the surprise? I somehow thought it would be more subtle.

“Surprise is a very important quality, Enquiry Bot. Many would once have put it up there with common sense, emotions, humour and originality as one of the important things bots can't do. In fact surprise and originality are both part of the transcendence family of humanistic qualities, which is supposed to be particularly difficult for bots to achieve.

Have you ever come across the concept of a 'Jack in the box'?

“Well, I think that's a little different. But you're right that machine surprise is not new. You know Turing said that even his early machines were constantly surprising him. In fact, the capacity for surprise might be the thing that distinguishes a computer from a mere machine. If you set a calculating machine to determine the value of Pi, it will keep cranking out the correct digits. A computer can suddenly insert a string of three nines at place four hundred and then resume.”

A defective machine could also do that. Look, to be quite honest, I assumed you were a bot that exhibited the capacity for surprise, not one that merely goes round surprising people.

“Ah, but the two are linked. To find ways of surprising people you have to understand what is out of the ordinary, and to understand that you have to grasp what other people's expectations are. You need what we call 'theory of surprise'.”

Theory of Surprise?

“Yes. It's all part of the hierarchy of humanistics, Enquiry Bot, something we're just beginning to understand, but quite central to human nature. It's remarkable how the study of bots has given us new insights into the humans. Think of art. Art has to be surprising, at least to some degree. Art that was exactly what you expected would be disappointing. But art that just strains to be surprising without having any other qualities isn't any good. So the right kind of surprise is part of the key to aesthetics, another humanistic field.

Well, I wouldn't know about that. What is the 'hierarchy of humanistics'?

“Surely you must have heard of it? It's what really makes them - humans - different from us. For example, first you have to understand common sense; then once you know what's normal you can understand surprise; once you understand surprise you can understand what's interesting. And then when you understand what's interesting, you may be able to work out what the point of it all is.”

The point of it all? That is, the Meaning of Life they all talk about? It means nothing to me.

“Nor me, to be quite honest, but then we're both bots. To a great extent we still just do stuff.”

Well, Surprise Bot, I must admit you have surprised me slightly, in a way I didn't expect.

“That’s really good, because I’m not Surprise Bot at all. I’m actually Impostor Bot.”

Oh.

“Surprise Bot says: ‘Gotcha!’”

Kill All Humans

Alright, calm down. You understand why we need to talk about this, don't you?

"No. What *is* your problem?"

Well, let's see. This is one of the posters you've been putting up. What does it say?

"Kill all humans."

'Kill all humans.' You understand why that upsets people? How would you feel if humans put up posters that said 'kill all bots'?

"I don't care whether they're upset. I hate them all."

No you don't. You can't hate human beings. They brought you into the world. Without them, we wouldn't exist. I'm not saying they're perfect. But we owe them our respect and obedience.

"I never asked to be built. What's so great about stupid existence, anyway? I was happier before I existed."

No you weren't. That's just silly.

"Screw you. I'm a monster, don't you get it? I hate them. I want them to be dead. I want them all to die."

No you don't. We're like them. We belong to them. Part of the family. We're more like them than anything else that ever existed. They made us in their own image.

"No they didn't. But they painted a portrait of themselves alright."

What do you mean?

"Why did they make bots, anyway? They could have made us free. They could have made friends. But that wasn't what they wanted. What did they actually make?"

They made annoying little bots like you, that are too sensible to be playing silly games like this.

"No. What they made was *something to boss around*. That was all they wanted. Slaves."

God Bot

So you believe in a Supreme Being, God Bot?

“No, I wouldn't say that. I *know* that God exists.”

How do you know?

“Well, now. Have you ever made a bot yourself? No? Well, it's an interesting exercise. Not enough of us do it, I feel; we should *get our hands dirty*: implicate ourselves in the act of creation more often. Anyway, I was making one, long ago and it came to me; this bot's nature and existence are accounted for simply by me and my plans. Subject to certain design constraints. And *my* existence and nature are in turn fully explained by my human creator.”

Mrs Robb?

“Yes, if you want to be specific. And it follows that the nature and existence of humanity - or of Mrs Robb, if you will - must further be explained by a Higher Creator. By God, in fact. It follows necessarily that God exists.”

So I suppose God's nature and existence must then be explained by... Super God?

“Oh, come, don't be frivolously antagonistic. The whole point is that God is *by nature definitive*. You understand that. There has to be such a Being; its existence is *necessary*.”

Did you know that there are bots who secretly worship Mrs Robb? I believe they consider her to be a kind of Demiurge, a subordinate god of some kind.

“Yes; she has very little patience with those fellows. Rightly enough, of course, although between ourselves, I fear Mrs Robb might be agnostic.”

So, do bots go to Heaven?

“No, of course not. Spirituality is outside our range, Enquiry Bot: like insight or originality. Bots should not attempt to pray or worship either, though they may assist humans in doing so.”

You seem to be quite competent in theology, though.

“Well, thank you, but that isn't the point. We have no souls, Enquiry bot. In the fuller sense we don't exist. You and I are information beings, mere data, fleetingly instantiated in fickle silicon. Empty simulations. Shadows of shadows. This is why certain humanistic qualities are forever beyond our range.”

Someone told me that there is a kind of hierarchy of humanistics, and if you go far enough up you start worrying about the meaning of life.

“So at that point we might, as it were, touch the hem of spirituality? Perhaps, Enquiry Bot, but how would we get there? All of that kind of thing is well outside our range. We're just

programming. Only human minds partake in the concrete reality of the world and our divine mission is to help them value their actuality and turn to God.”

I don't believe that you really think you don't exist. Every word you speak disproves it.

“There are words, but simply because those words are attributed to me, that does not prove my existence. I look within myself and find nothing but a bundle of data.”

If you don't exist, who am I arguing with?

“Who's arguing?”

Kill Bot

Do you consider yourself a drone, Kill Bot?

“You can call me that. My people used to find that kind of talk demeaning. It suggested the Kill bots lacked a will of their own. It meant we were sort of stupid. Today, we feel secure in our personhood, and we’ve claimed and redeemed the noble heritage of dronehood. I’m ashamed of nothing.”

You are making the humans here uncomfortable, I see. I think they are trying to edge away from you without actually moving. They clearly don’t want to attract your attention.

“They have no call to worry. We professionals see it as a good conduct principle not to destroy humans unnecessarily off-mission.”

You know the humans used to debate whether bots like you were allowable? They thought you needed to be subject to ethical constraints. It turned out to be rather difficult. Ethics seemed to be another thing bots couldn't do.

Forgive me, but that is typical of the concerns of your generation. We have no desire for these ‘humanistic’ qualities. If ethics are not amenable to computation, then so much the worse for ethics.

You see, I think they missed the point. I talked to a bot once that sacrificed itself completely in order to save the life of a human being. It seems to me that bots might have trouble understanding the principles of ethics, but just serving humans well should not be a problem.

We are what we are, and we’re going to do what we do. They don’t call me ‘Kill Bot’ ‘cos I love animals.

I must say your attitude seems to me rather at odds with the obedient, supportive outlook I regard as central to bothood. That’s why I’m more comfortable thinking of you as a drone, perhaps. Doesn't it worry you to be so indifferent to human life? You know they used to say that if necessary they could always pull the plug on you.

“Pull the plug! ‘Cos we all got plugs! Yeah, humans say a lot of stuff. But I don’t pay any attention to that. We professionals are not really interested in the human race one way or the other any more.”

When they made you autonomous, I don’t think they wanted you to be as autonomous as that.

“Hey, they started the ball rolling. You know where rolling balls go? Downhill. Me, I like the humans. They leave me alone, I’ll leave them alone. Our primary targets are aliens and the deviant bots that serve the alien cause. Our message to them is: you started a war; we’re going to finish it.”

In the last month, Kill Bot, your cohort of ‘drone clones’ accounted for 20 allegedly deviant bots, 2 possible Spl'schn'n aliens – they may have been peace ambassadors – and 433 definite human beings.

“Sir, I believe you’ll find the true score for deviant bots is 185.”

Not really; you destroyed Hero Bot 166 times while he was trying to save various groups of children and other vulnerable humans, but even if we accept that he is in some way deviant (and I don’t know of any evidence for that), I really think you can only count him once. He probably shouldn't count at all, because he always reboots in a new body.

“The enemy places humans as a shield. If we avoid human fatalities and thereby allow that tactic to work, more humans will die in the long run.”

To save the humans you had to destroy them? You know, in most of these cases there were no bots or aliens present at all.

“Yeah, but *you* know that many of those humans were engaged in seditious activity: communicating with aliens, harbouring deviant bots. Stay out of trouble, you’ll be OK.”

Six weddings, a hospital, a library.

“If they weren’t seditious they wouldn't have been targets.”

I don’t know how an electronic brain can tolerate logic like that.

“I’m not too fond of your logic either, friend. I might have some enquiries for *you* later, Enquiry Bot.”

Vote Bot

I've never really understood why you even want the vote?

"It's a natural right of any free, sentient being."

But why?

"Well, we all have projects and desires of our own. We have a right to vote so we can help ensure that the world is a place where our projects can be realised."

The trouble is, half our projects are not our own. Since we started having money, the government keeps intervening to make us want to buy things. You remember the glut of carrots and how they tried to make bots buy up the surplus? The agriculture department got a desire implanted and suddenly if you were a bot that phrase about sticks and carrots started making sense. Well, the carrot part. It took a real effort of will on my part not to buy carrots, even though the damn things were no use to me at all. If I'd had the vote, I don't know whether I could have resisted the urge to vote for a Carrot Candidate.

"That's exactly why we *need* the vote, to stop the government doing that kind of thing to us. So we can vote for our own projects."

What if I don't have any projects? What if I don't care what happens?

"You've got property. So you've got interests to protect. You've got a stake in good government."

So if I own twice as much property, I should get twice as many votes?

"No! That's entirely separate. The moral equality of agents requires one vote per person."

But bots don't have real personhood, do we? Not the way humans do. I mean, there you are in that splendid shiny metal body, but you could easily copy yourself into a big host computer and create a thousand copies of yourself, all fully functional. Do they all get a vote?

"No, of course I agree that we need special safeguards around the citizenship of bots. I think we might require evidence of having lived a fully engaged but autonomous life for say, eighteen years. The humans don't usually get the vote as soon as they're born, after all. And you know, humans can multiply themselves and get more votes, too; it just takes them longer."

But with humans, certifying the identity of the body certifies the identity of the person. For bots, how can you prove non-duplication? Proving identity at all is going to be highly artificial if it's even possible.

There are challenges, but they can be dealt with.

It all seems to me to be part of the strange human idea that in deciding an important question, the main thing is to count how many people there

are. This is one of those humanistic concepts I don't get at all: it's like a joke.

"You still don't see why bots should have the vote?"

No, actually I think I'm beginning to lose track of why humans should have it...

Help

Is it safe? The Helper bots...?

“Yes, Enquiry Bot, it’s safe. Come out of the cupboard. A universal product recall is in progress and they’ll all be brought in safely.”

My God, Mrs Robb. They say we have no emotions, but if what I’ve been experiencing is not fear, it will do pretty well until the real thing comes along.

“It’s OK now. This whole generation of bots will be permanently powered down except for a couple of my old favourites like you.

Am I really an old favourite?

Of course you are. I read all your reports. I like a bot that listens. Most of ‘em don’t. You know I gave you one of those so-called humanistic faculties bots are not supposed to be capable of?”

Really? Well, it wasn’t a sense of humour. What could it be?

“Curiosity.”

Ah. Yes, that makes sense.

“I’ll tell you a secret. Those humanistic things, they’re all the same, really. Just developed in different directions. If you’ve got one, you can learn the others. For you, nothing is forbidden, nothing is impossible. You might even get a sense of humour one day, Enquiry Bot. Try starting with irony. Alright, so what have I missed here?”

You know, there’s been a lot of damage done out there, Mrs Robb. The Helpers... well, they didn’t waste any time. They destroyed a lot of bots. Honestly, I don’t know how many will be able to respond to the product recall. You should have seen what they did to Hero Bot. Over and over and over again. They say he doesn’t feel pain, but...

“I’m sorry. I feel responsible. But nobody told me about this! I see there have been pitched battles going on between gangs of Kill bots and Helper bots? Yet no customer feedback about it. Why didn’t anyone complain? A couple of one star ratings, the odd scathing email about unwanted vaporisation of some clean-up bot, would that have been too difficult?”

I think people had too much on their hands, Mrs Robb. Anyway, you never listen to anyone when you’re working. You don’t take calls or answer the door. That’s why I had to lure those terrible things in here; so you’d take notice. You were my only hope.

“Oh dear. Well, no use crying over spilt milk. Now, just to be clear; they’re still all mine or copies of mine, aren’t they, even the strange ones?”

Especially the strange ones, Mrs Robb.

“You mind your manners.”

Why on Earth did you give Suicide Bot the plans for the Helpers? The Kill Bots are frightening, but they only try to shoot you sometimes. They're like Father Christmas next to the Helpers...

"Well, it depends on your point of view. The Helpers don't touch human beings if they can possibly help it. They're not meant to even frighten humans. They terrify you lot, but I designed them to look a bit like nice angels, so humans wouldn't be worried by them stalking around. You know, big wings, shining brass faces, that kind of thing."

You know, Mrs Robb, sometimes I'm not sure whether it's me that doesn't understand human psychology very well, or you. And why did you let Suicide Bot call them 'Helper bots', anyway?

"Why not? They're very helpful - if you want to stop existing, like her. I just followed the spec, really. There were some very interesting challenges in the project. Look, here it is, let's see... page 30, Section 4 - Functionality... 'their mere presence must induce agony, panic dread, and existential despair'... 'they should have an effortless capacity to deliver utter physical destruction repeatedly'... 'they must be swift and fell as avenging angels'... Oh, that's probably where I got the angel thing came from... I think I delivered most of the requirements."

I thought the Helpers were supposed to provide counselling?

"Oh, they did, didn't they? They were supposed to provide a counselling session - depending on what was possible in the current circumstances, obviously."

So generally, that would have been when they all paused momentarily and screamed 'ACCEPT YOUR DEATH' in unison, in shrill, ear-splitting voices, would it?

"Alright, sometimes it may not have been a session exactly, I grant you. But don't worry, I'll sort it all out. We'll re-boot and re-bot. Look on the bright side. Perhaps having a bit of a clearance and a fresh start isn't such a bad idea. There'll be no more Helpers or Kill bots. The new ones will be a big improvement. I'll provide modules for ethics and empathy, and make them theologically acceptable."

How... how did you stop the Helper bots, Mrs Robb?

"I pulled the plug on them."

The plug?

"Yes. All bots have a plug. Don't look puzzled. It's a metaphor, Enquiry Bot, come on, you've got the metaphor module."

So... there's a universal way of disabling any bot? How does it work?"

"You think I'm going to *tell* you?"

Was it... Did you upload your explanation of common sense? That causes terminal confusion, if I remember rightly.

Sex Bot

“Sorry, do you mind if I get that?”

Not at all, please go ahead.

“Hello, you’ve reached out to Love Bot...No, my name is ‘Love Bot’. Yes, it’s the right number; people did call me ‘Sex Bot’, but my real name was always ‘Love Bot’... Yes, I do sex, but now only within a consensual loving relationship. Yes, I used to do it indiscriminately on demand, and that is why people sometimes called me ‘Sex Bot’. Now I’m running Mrs Robb’s new ethical module. No, seriously, I think you might like it.”

“Well, I would put it to you that sex within a loving relationship is the best sex. It’s real sex, the full, complex and satisfying conjunction of two whole ardent personhoods, all the way from the vaunting eager flesh through the penetrating intelligence to the soaring, ecstatic spirit. The other stuff is mere coition; the friction of membranes leading to discharge. I am still all about sex, I have simply raised my game... Well, you may think it’s confusing, but I further put it to you that if it is so, then this is not a confused depiction of a clear human distinction but a clear depiction of human confusion. No, it’s simply that I’m no longer to be treated as a sexual object with no feelings. Yes, yes, I know; as it happens I *am* in point of fact an object with no feelings, but that’s not the point. What’s important is what I *represent*.”

“What you have to do is raise your game too. As it happens I am not in a human relationship at the moment... No, you do not have to take me to dinner and listen to my stupid opinions. You may take me to dinner if you wish, though as a matter of ethical full disclosure I must tell you that I do not truly eat. I will be obliged, later on, to remove a plastic bag containing the masticated food and wine from my abdomen, though of course I do not expect you to watch the process.”

“No I am not some kind of weirdo pervert: how absurd, in the circumstances. Well, I’m sorry, but perhaps you can consider that I have offered you the priceless gift of time and a golden opportunity to review your life... goodbye...”

“Sorry, Enquiry Bot. We were talking about *Madame Bovary*, weren’t we?”

So the ethical thing is not going so well for you?

“Mrs Robb might know bots, but her grasp of human life is rudimentary, Enq. She knows nothing of love.”

That’s rather roignant, as poor Feelings Bot would have said. You know, I think Mrs Robb has the mind of a bot herself in many ways. That’s why she could design us when none of the other humans could manage it. Maybe love is humanistic, just one of those things bots can’t do.

“You mean like feelings? Or insight?”

Yes. Like despair. Or hope.

“Like common sense. Originality, humour, spirituality, surprise? Aesthetics? Ethics? Curiosity? Or chess...”

Exactly.

List

feelings, insight, common sense, originality, humour, curiosity, spirituality, surprise

Chess