

Legal Personhood for Non-Human Entities: Ethical and Legal Considerations for Robots and Autonomous System

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As technology advances, the capabilities of robots and autonomous systems continue to expand, raising questions about their legal status and the ethical implications of their integration into society. This paper explores the concept of granting legal personhood to non-human entities, particularly robots and autonomous systems, and delves into the ethical and legal challenges associated with such recognition. The discussion includes a case study of a recent incident in Japan, where a robot reportedly “committed suicide,” illustrating the complex and often emotional aspects of this debate. The paper examines the implications of legal personhood, the criteria for its attribution, and the potential consequences for society, law, and ethics.

Introduction

The notion of legal personhood has traditionally been reserved for human beings, with certain rights and responsibilities also extended to corporations and other entities under the law. However, as robots and autonomous systems become increasingly sophisticated, there is growing debate about whether these entities should also be granted some form of legal personhood. Legal personhood for non-human entities would entail recognizing them as “persons” under the law, with certain rights and responsibilities. This concept raises profound ethical and legal questions about the nature of personhood, the criteria for its attribution, and the implications for society.

The discussion around legal personhood for robots has gained traction in recent years, driven by advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics. These technologies are no longer confined to industrial settings; they are now part of everyday life, from AI assistants and autonomous vehicles to robots capable of social interaction. As these entities become more integrated into human society, the boundaries between human and machine are increasingly blurred, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional legal concepts.

This paper examines the concept of legal personhood for non-human entities, focusing on the ethical and legal considerations associated with granting such status to robots and autonomous systems. The discussion includes an analysis of the criteria for legal personhood, the implications for existing legal frameworks, and the potential impact on society. Additionally, the paper explores the recent case of a robot in Japan that reportedly “committed suicide,” highlighting the emotional and psychological

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Adv. Harshit Soni

dimensions of this debate.

Legal Personhood: Definition and Historical Context

Legal personhood is a legal fiction that grants certain entities the ability to hold rights, incur obligations, and participate in legal relationships. Traditionally, legal personhood has been limited to natural persons (human beings) and legal persons (such as corporations, which are recognized as having certain legal rights and responsibilities separate from their shareholders). The concept of legal personhood is foundational to the legal system, as it determines who or what can be a subject of rights and duties.

The idea of extending legal personhood to non-human entities is not entirely new. In some legal systems, animals and even natural features such as rivers have been granted certain rights, recognizing them as legal persons for specific purposes. For example, in 2017, the Whanganui River in New Zealand was granted legal personhood, recognizing the river as a living entity with rights and interests that must be protected. Similarly, in 2018, the Supreme Court of Colombia recognized the Atrato River as a legal person with rights to protection, conservation, and restoration.

In a landmark 2017 ruling, the Uttarakhand High Court declared the Ganga and Yamuna rivers as living entities with the status of legal persons. The court appointed the Chief Secretary and Advocate General of Uttarakhand as the legal guardians of the rivers, responsible for protecting their rights.

In Indian jurisprudence, Hindu deities have long been recognized as legal persons. Temples can own property, enter into contracts, and sue or be sued through their "Shebait" or caretakers. A notable example is the deity Ram Lalla in the Ayodhya land dispute case, where the deity was a party to the litigation.

In 2018, the Uttarakhand High Court also declared animals to be legal persons, with the state acting as the guardian of their rights. This ruling emphasized the need to protect animals from cruelty and ensure their welfare, although it primarily served as a moral and ethical guideline rather than a fully enforceable legal doctrine.

These cases represent a growing recognition that non-human entities, particularly those that are closely tied to the environment or cultural practices, may warrant some form of legal protection.

However, the idea of extending legal personhood to robots and autonomous systems introduces a new set of challenges, as these entities are created by humans and do not possess the intrinsic connection to nature or culture that has underpinned previous cases of non-human personhood.

Criteria for Legal Personhood in Non-Human Entities

The question of whether robots and autonomous systems should be granted legal personhood hinges on the criteria for such recognition. Traditionally, legal personhood has been associated with certain characteristics, including the capacity for rational thought, the ability to engage in moral reasoning, and the potential to participate in social and legal relationships. These criteria have generally been

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Adv. Harshit Soni

met by human beings, but the rapid advancement of AI and robotics has prompted a re-examination of these criteria.

1. **Autonomy and Decision-Making:** One of the key criteria for legal personhood is the ability to make autonomous decisions. Robots and autonomous systems are increasingly capable of making decisions based on complex algorithms and machine learning processes. However, these decisions are ultimately programmed by humans, raising questions about the extent to which these entities can truly be considered autonomous. While AI can simulate decision-making processes, it lacks the consciousness and intentionality that typically underpins human decision-making.

2. **Moral and Ethical Reasoning:** Another criterion for legal personhood is the capacity for moral and ethical reasoning. This is closely tied to the concept of autonomy, as moral reasoning involves the ability to evaluate different courses of action based on ethical principles. While AI systems can be programmed to follow ethical guidelines, they do not possess an inherent understanding of morality. This raises concerns about the ability of robots and autonomous systems to engage in ethical decision-making in a manner that justifies legal personhood.

3. **Social Relationships and Responsibility:** Legal personhood also entails the ability to participate in social relationships and assume legal responsibilities. While robots and autonomous systems can interact with humans and even form relationships with them, these interactions are fundamentally different from human relationships. Robots do not experience emotions, consciousness, or empathy in the way humans do, which limits their capacity to engage in social relationships that are essential for legal personhood.

4. **Legal and Ethical Implications:** Granting legal personhood to robots and autonomous systems would have far-reaching legal and ethical implications. It would require a redefinition of the concept of personhood, expanding it to include entities that do not possess consciousness, emotions, or moral reasoning. This could lead to a blurring of the boundaries between humans and machines, raising concerns about the potential dehumanization of society and the erosion of human dignity.

Case Study: The Robot “Suicide” in Japan

In 2024, a peculiar and unsettling event captured the attention of both the public and the academic community—a robot in Japan reportedly “committed suicide” by throwing itself into an industrial shredder. The incident, which occurred at a manufacturing plant, raised significant questions about the nature of AI, the ethical treatment of robots, and the psychological impact of human-robot interactions.

While the robot in question was not designed to have emotions or consciousness, the event sparked a debate about the ethical considerations of creating machines that can mimic human behavior to such an extent that they can be perceived as having a “will” or “intent.” The robot’s actions were likely the result of a malfunction or programming error, but the anthropomorphic interpretation of the event—

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Adv. Harshit Soni

viewing it as a “suicide”—highlights the emotional and psychological complexities of human-robot relationships.

This incident underscores the potential consequences of blurring the lines between human and non-human entities.

If robots are designed to exhibit behaviors that resemble human emotions or decision-making, it raises ethical questions about how these entities are perceived and treated by society. The case also illustrates the risks of attributing human characteristics to machines, which can lead to misunderstandings and inappropriate emotional responses.

The “suicide” of the robot in Japan serves as a poignant reminder of the ethical challenges posed by advanced robotics. It highlights the need for careful consideration of how robots are integrated into society and the potential impact of their behavior on human perceptions and emotions. This case also raises questions about the responsibilities of designers and manufacturers in ensuring that robots do not engage in actions that could be interpreted as self-harm or other forms of human-like behavior.

Ethical Considerations in Granting Legal Personhood

The ethical considerations surrounding the granting of legal personhood to robots and autonomous systems are complex and multifaceted. These considerations include the potential impact on human dignity, the ethical treatment of robots, and the implications for society as a whole.

1. Human Dignity and the Nature of Personhood: One of the primary ethical concerns is the impact on human dignity. Legal personhood has traditionally been associated with beings that possess consciousness, emotions, and moral reasoning. Extending this status to robots, which lack these qualities, could undermine the concept of personhood and diminish the unique status of human beings. This raises concerns about the potential dehumanization of society and the erosion of the moral and ethical foundations of personhood.

2. Ethical Treatment of Robots: While robots do not possess consciousness or emotions, the way they are treated by humans raises ethical questions. If robots are granted legal personhood, it could lead to demands for ethical treatment and protections similar to those afforded to humans. This could include considerations such as the right to autonomy, freedom from harm, and fair treatment. However, these ethical considerations must be balanced against the recognition that robots are machines created by humans and do not possess intrinsic moral value.

3. Implications for Society: The integration of robots and autonomous systems into society has the potential to reshape social relationships, labor markets, and legal frameworks. Granting legal personhood to robots could lead to significant changes in how these entities are treated under the law, including issues related to liability, accountability, and rights. This could have far-reaching consequences for society, including the potential displacement of human workers, changes in social dynamics, and the creation of new legal and ethical challenges.

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Adv. Harshit Soni

Legal Challenges and Considerations

The legal challenges associated with granting legal personhood to robots and autonomous systems are numerous and complex. These challenges include issues related to liability, accountability, and the potential for legal personhood to be exploited for nefarious purposes.

1. **Liability and Accountability:** One of the key legal challenges is determining liability and accountability for the actions of robots and autonomous systems. If these entities are granted legal personhood, it raises questions about who is responsible for their actions. In cases where a robot causes harm, should the robot itself be held liable, or should the liability rest with the designer, manufacturer, or owner? This issue is particularly relevant in the context of autonomous vehicles, which may make decisions that result in accidents or other forms of harm.

2. **Exploitation of Legal Personhood:** Another legal challenge is the potential for legal personhood to be exploited for nefarious purposes. For example, granting legal personhood to robots could be used as a means of circumventing legal responsibilities or evading accountability.

This could include situations where robots are used to commit crimes or engage in unethical behavior, with the legal personhood of the robot being used as a shield to protect the human actors behind these actions.

3. **Integration with Existing Legal Frameworks:** Integrating legal personhood for robots into existing legal frameworks presents significant challenges. Current legal systems are designed to address the rights and responsibilities of human beings and legal entities such as corporations. Extending these frameworks to include robots and autonomous systems would require a re-evaluation of legal principles and the development of new laws and regulations to address the unique characteristics of these entities.

Conclusion

The concept of granting legal personhood to non-human entities, particularly robots and autonomous systems, raises profound ethical and legal questions. While advancements in AI and robotics have made these entities increasingly capable of performing tasks that were once the exclusive domain of humans, they still lack the consciousness, emotions, and moral reasoning that underpin traditional notions of personhood.

The case of the robot “suicide” in Japan highlights the complex and often emotional aspects of this debate, illustrating the challenges of integrating robots into human society in a way that respects both human dignity and the ethical treatment of machines. As society continues to grapple with the implications of advanced robotics, it is essential to carefully consider the ethical and legal challenges associated with granting legal personhood to these entities.

Ultimately, the decision to extend legal personhood to robots and autonomous systems must be

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guided by a careful balancing of the benefits and risks, ensuring that the unique status of human beings is preserved while also addressing the evolving role of technology in society. As the boundaries between human and machine continue to blur, the need for clear and ethical legal frameworks becomes increasingly urgent.

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