

# Can You Murder a Robot?

by Richard Fowler

**T**he idea of robots and humans living side-by-side is becoming less sci-fi and more of a reality. But what are we to think when we hear of the ‘murder’ of a hitchhiking robot?

Hitchbot was its name – and I use ‘was’ intentionally, because this roaming robot was killed. As part of a project run by Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, Hitchbot, a scrapyard-looking bot, fitted with GPS, was picked up by members of the public and taken wherever they were going. The bot, with a cake container for a head, became quite popular. But then one day the worst fears of its creators came true. Some unknown person or persons decided to take Hitchbot’s life!

Hitchbot was found with its arms and legs ripped off and head missing. The lead researcher, Dr Frauke Zeller, and her team mourned the loss but were always aware this could be a possible outcome.

But it raises an ethical question: can you actually murder a robot?

The question is a philosophical one and forces us to ask what makes us human in the first place. Certainly, it was an act of vandalism. But murder?

Humans are called *sapiens* for a reason. Meaning ‘wise’ in Latin, it distinguishes humans from other creatures. ‘But’, I hear you say, ‘these robots are increasingly intelligent (wise), so what’s the difference?’ Good point.

We can connect with them, but can they connect with us?

I think the answer to that is found in this statement by Prof. Rosalind Picard, who leads the Affective Computing Lab, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: ‘We are made for relationships, even us [sic] engineers, and that is such a powerful thing that we fit machines into that.’<sup>1</sup> Yes, we can become attached to people and even robots, but robots don’t have the emotional faculties to reciprocate the same feelings and emotions.

We are sentient beings and they are not. A robot cannot experience the joy of love or know what it feels like to be happy. You might be able to hug and high-five it, but it will not understand or feel the emotion behind your hug or smile.

Still, someone could argue that increasingly the programming of algorithms can lead AI (artificial intelligence) robots to respond in ways that show they have learnt something about our emotions, like noticing our tone of voice if we are sad (this kind of reciprocal learning was explored in the recently released film *Life Like*).

But even here there is something missing: choice. Whereas our little friend Hitchbot was limited by the coding programmed into it, we humans have the autonomy to choose.

As humans, we choose how we respond to others. We choose to care, choose to love. Really, love can only exist in the realm of choice. Does it not follow that authentic relationships can only flow out of choice? It’s what makes us human: freewill and agency. This is the sole privilege of a human, and will never be that of a mechanic, algorithm-imprinted piece of metal.



Hitchbot goes to an exhibition in Toronto in 2014.

Maybe there’s a bigger question still: where did this choice come from? Where do you get free will and agency from? Were we programmed?

Some would suggest that free will can only come from a place of equal free will. Surely, freedom can only beget freedom. So, is being human, in fact, a reflection of a place where equal free will and agency exists?

If so, is that where God comes in?

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-47090174](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-47090174)