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Humans and Robots

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Human-robot relations is a [sexy](#) research topic. Conferences such as the [3rd International Conference on Human-Robot Personal Relationships earlier this year \(June 23-24, 2010\)](#) attract media attention (e.g. [nrc.next](#)) and people blog on [intimate machines](#) and [personal robots](#).

[Human-robot relations](#) is not only about intimate relations or sex, but covers domains of application ranging from home entertainment and household assistance to health care and military applications. Some try to develop robots that [fetch beer from the fridge](#), others consider robots as a solution to problems with care for the elderly.

However, while social and personal robotics is a growing research field and progress has been made in the design and use of such robots, a large gap remains between science-fiction and reality. Even robots and robotic heads that mimic human appearance, such as Hiroshi Ishiguro's [Repliee](#) and [Geminoid](#) at Osaka University in Japan (see also [IEEE's website](#)) or the robotic head [Bina](#), are likely to disappoint those who have high expectations, fantasies, or nightmares about [living with robots](#) in the near-future.

Nevertheless, I believe the field deserves attention for at least three reasons.

First, there are real, ongoing developments in robotics and AI that raise ethical issues. For example, should robots be introduced in elderly care and how? (see the [3TU care robots project](#) I initiated) Is it acceptable to use autonomous military robots like [drones](#) and (other) robotic [fighting machines](#) or [killing machines](#)? Even if these technologies are only just beginning to emerge, ethics should try to anticipate potential ethical issues relevant to society. Therefore, philosophical reflection should be enriched by discussions with designers, social studies of science and technology, and [why not](#) [interpretations of science-fiction](#).

Second, in practice many robot designers do not only aim at creating robots; they also use robots to understand nature. The robot then acts as a kind of model of nature. Let's call that robot a [material model](#) or [artefactual model](#). To the extent that robot designers have this aim, they are as much scientists as they are engineers. For example, [Robert Full's lab](#) (Berkeley) uses animals as a source of inspiration for building robots but at the same time aims at better understanding animals by building the robots. This is of interest to philosophers of science and engineering who try to gain more insight in what is happening in and between both domains.

Third, visions of robotic futures are not only entertaining or perhaps frightening; they can also inspire philosophical reflection on various research topics that are not necessarily and not directly related to robotics or technology. In my own work I have shown how thinking about robots can spark off reflection on the nature of [emotions](#), rights and [moral consideration](#), the boundaries of the sphere of [justice](#), the importance of [appearance](#) in human social life and in relation to [responsibility](#), and criteria for good health [care](#) and human flourishing. More generally, as I argued last year at the [ECAP](#) conference: whatever other purpose they may serve, artefacts and technology are hermeneutic tools that help us to understand ourselves. It is only in relation to other, non-human entities [artificial](#), [natural](#), or even [fictional](#) that we can hope to shed some light on what we are and what we want to be as humans.

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