June 2019

Dear Future English 10 AP Capstone Seminar Student,

Welcome to what is sure to be an amazing class! In order to properly prepare for the course and to get a sense of the type of work that we will be doing, we are providing you with a summer assignment. Please pursue this as an intellectual activity and do not concern yourself with a grade. This will be an assignment discussed together during the third week of class.

During the course, you will frequently be reading nonfiction argument essays that you will be assigned to break down according to its "line of reasoning." To be more specific, you will need to determine the central idea of the piece, the major reasons used to support that claim, and the quality of the evidence supplied to support those reasons. Obviously there is not one correct answer to this; it is more of an issue of the lengths the writer goes to prove his/her point.

If you have any questions or concerns about this assignment, please do not hesitate to email Jeffrey Yagaloff at jyagaloff@pobschools.org or to call him at (516) 434-3185. He would be more than happy to answer any questions about this assignment or the course in general and is available and eager to help throughout the summer.

We are looking forward to meeting you in the fall and hope that your summer is a wonderful one filled with lasting memories!

Rohe Ahmad, Michael Horun, Kimberly Muller, and Jeffrey Yagaloff

English 10 AP Capstone Teachers

Directions: Read the passage below and then respond to the following three questions.

1. Identify the author's argument, main idea, or thesis.
2. Explain the author's line of reasoning by identifying the claims used to build the argument and the connections between them.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the evidence the author uses to support the claims made in the argument.

Please note: You are being provided with separate pages to record your answers to the three distinct questions.

Is it OK to Torture or Murder a Robot?

Richard Fisher

Kate Darling likes to ask you to do terrible things to cute robots. At a workshop she organized this year, Darling asked people to play with a Pleo robot, a child's toy dinosaur. The soft green Pleo has trusting eyes and affectionate movements. When you take one out of the box, it acts like a helpless newborn puppy – it can't walk and you have to teach it about the world.

Yet after an hour allowing people to tickle and cuddle these loveable dinosaurs, Darling turned executioner. She gave the participants knives, hatchets and other weapons, and ordered them to torture and dismember their toys. What happened next "was much more dramatic than we ever anticipated," she says.

For Darling, a researcher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, our reaction to robot cruelty is important because a new wave of machines is forcing us to reconsider our relationship with them. When Darling described her Pleo experiment in a talk in Boston this month, she made the case that mistreating certain kinds of robots could soon become unacceptable in the eyes of society. She even believes that we may need a set of "robot rights." If so, in what circumstance would it be OK to torture or murder a robot? And what would it take to make you think twice before being cruel to a machine?

Until recently, the idea of robot rights had been left to the realms of science fiction. Perhaps that's because the real machines surrounding us have been relatively unsophisticated. Nobody feels bad about chucking away a toaster or a remote-control toy car. Yet the arrival of social robots changes that. They display autonomous behavior, show intent and embody familiar forms like pets or humanoids, says Darling. In other words, they act as if they are alive. It triggers our emotions, and often we can't help it.

For example, in a small experiment conducted for the radio show Radiolab 2011, Freedom Baird of MIT asked children to hold upside down a Barbie doll, a hamster and a Furby robot for as long as they felt comfortable. While the children held the doll upside down until their arms got tired, they soon stopped torturing the wriggling hamster, and after a little while, the Furby too. They were old enough to know the Furby was a toy, but couldn't stand the way it was programmed to cry and say "Me scared."

It's not just kids that form surprising bonds with these bundles of wires and circuits. Some people give names to their Roomba vacuum cleaners, says Darling. And soldiers honor their robots with "medals" or hold funerals for them. She cites one particularly striking example of a military robot that was designed to defuse landmines by stepping on them. In a test, the explosions ripped off most of the robot's legs, and yet the crippled machine continued to limp along. Watching the robot struggle, the colonel in charge called off the test because it was "inhumane," according to the Washington Post."

Killer Instinct

Some researchers are converging on the idea that if a robot looks like it is alive, with its own mind, the tiniest of simulated cues forces us to feel empathy with machines, even though we know they are artificial.

Earlier this year, researchers from the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany used an fMRI scanner and devices that measure skin conductance to track people's reactions to a video of somebody torturing a Pleo dinosaur – choking it, putting it inside a plastic bag or striking it. The physiological and emotional responses they measured were much stronger than expected, despite being aware they were watching a robot.

Darling discovered the same when she asked people to torture the Pleo with the weapons they had been given. So then Darling started playing mind games, telling them they could save their own dinosaur by killing somebody else's. Even then, they wouldn't do it.

Finally, she told the group that unless one person stepped forward and killed just one Pleo, all the robots would be slaughtered. After much hand-wringing, one reluctant man stepped forward with his hatchet, and delivered a blow to a toy.

After this brutal act, the room fell silent for a few seconds, Darling recalls. The strength of people's emotional reaction seemed to have surprised them.

Given the possibility of such strong emotional reactions, a few years ago roboticists in Europe argued that we need a new set of ethical rules for building robots. The idea was to adapt author Isaac Asimov's famous "laws of robotics" for the modern age. One of their five rules was that robots "should not be designed in a deceptive way…their machine nature must be transparent." In other words, there needs to be a way to break the illusion of emotion and intent, and see a robot for what it is: wires, actuators and software.

Darling, however, believes that we could go further than a few ethical guidelines. We may need to protect "robot rights" in our legal systems, she says.

If this sounds absurd, Darling points out that there are precedents from animal cruelty laws. Why exactly do we have legal protection for animals? Is it simply because they can suffer? If that's true, then Darling questions why we have strong laws to protect some animals, but not others. Many people are happy to eat animals kept in awful conditions on industrial farms or to crush an insect under their foot, yet would be aghast at mistreatment of their next-door neighbor's cat, or seeing a whale harvested for meat.

The reason, says Darling, could be that we create laws when we recognize their suffering as similar to our own. Perhaps the main reason we created many of these laws is because we don't like to see the act of cruelty. It's less about the animal's experience and more about our own emotional pain. So, even though robots are

machines, Darling argues that there may be a point beyond which the performance of cruelty – rather than its consequences – is too uncomfortable to tolerate.

Feel Your Pain

Indeed, harm to a victim is not always the only reason we decide to regulate a technology. Consider an altogether different kind of gadget: a few weeks ago the British Medical Association argued that smoking e-cigarettes should be banned in public indoor spaces in the UK. It doesn't matter that the smoke or those nearby face no health risks, the BMA argued. It normalizes real smoking in public places once again.

To take another example: if a father is torturing a robot in front of his four-year old son, would that be acceptable? The child can't be expected to have the sophisticated understanding of adults. Torturing a robot teaches them that acts that cause suffering – simulated or not – are OK in some circumstances.

Somewhere down the line there's also the possibility of a nasty twist: that machines really could experience suffering – just not like our own. Already some researchers have begun making robots "feel pain to navigate the world. Some are concerned that when machines eventually acquire a basic sense of their own existence, the consequences will not be pleasant. For this reason, the philosopher Thomas Metzinger argues that we should stop trying to create intelligent robots at all. The first conscious machines, says Metzinger, will be like confused, disabled infants – certainly not the sophisticated, malign AI of science fiction – and so treating them like typical machines would be cruel. If robots have a basic consciousness, then it doesn't matter if it is simulated, he says. It believes it is alive, it can experience suffering. Metzinger put it like this: "We should refrain from doing anything to increase the overall amount of suffering in the universe."

What's clear is that there is a spectrum of "aliveness" in robots, from basic simulations of cute animal behavior, to future robots that acquire a sense of suffering. But as Darling's Pleo dinosaur experiment suggested, it doesn't take much to trigger an emotional response in us. The question is whether we can – or should – define the line beyond which cruelty to these machines is acceptable. Where does the line lie for you? If a robot cries out in pain, or begs for mercy? If it believes it is hurting? If it bleeds?

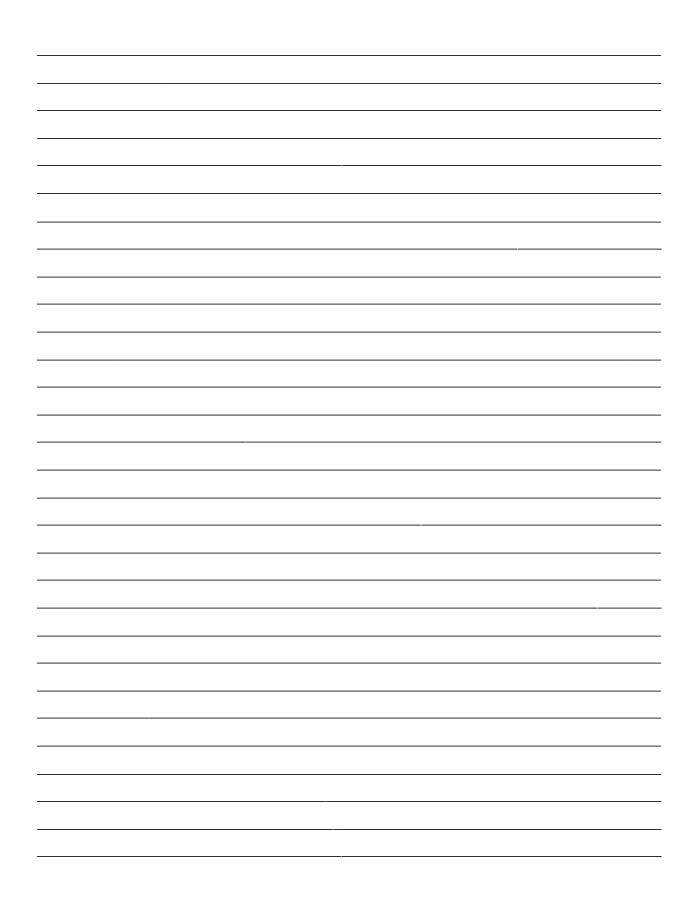- Identify the author's argument, main idea, or thesis.

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