

Book Review

John-Stewart Gordon (2026) *The Robot Rights Manifesto*. Palgrave Macmillan

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John-Stewart Gordon's book, *The Robot Rights Manifesto* builds steadily toward a strong claim about robot rights. He draws on a wide range of philosophical sources to support his argument which culminates in his final proposal of 'The Robot Bill of Rights,' situated at the end of the book. The chapter structure of the book is logically sequenced, and they cumulatively construct a coherent picture of the author's position. Although the book grapples with complex and novel ideas, they are presented with clarity.

Gordon's background in ethics and philosophy resonates, as he draws the reader into a self-questioning inquiry about robot rights throughout the book. He refers to his own previous works several times, signalling a sustained research history in this area that underwrites the book's claims. This also shows that his prior work brings the book's arguments already tested against scholarly scrutiny.

Gordon frames the book as a response to one of the most crucial moral challenges of this century, which in his framing it is, how to find a balance with artificial humanoids in a world that where we will both exist as beings with moral status. His central thesis holds that once artificial entities cross morally relevant thresholds, they shall merit recognition as beings with moral status and ultimately as bearers of rights.

Arguments presented in the book unfold cumulatively across the chapters. The book opens by dismantling human exceptionalism and contend that advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, and the cognitive sciences make it implausible to reserve moral standing for humans alone. The first chapter challenges the anthropocentric assumptions embedded around some of the foundational concepts like personhood. Gordon states that, these concepts that are currently being used, do not rest on species-independent criteria. Chapter 2 introduces the artificial humanoids, and here Gordon argues that once humanoids display intelligence, decision-making, and self-expression resembling of moral agents, excluding them from our moral and political communities becomes unreasonable.

Chapter 3 delves into moral circle by invoking precedents from slavery to the animal rights movement. In this chapter, by making a historical account of morality, Gordon shows that just as moral progress has repeatedly extended rights to previously excluded groups, artificial entities may represent the next frontier. In Chapter 4, which bears Gordon's original proposal, the argument is built through a tiered scheme of artificial citizenship benefitting from the theoretical backdrop of Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka's *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*.¹ He offers a refined application of Donaldson and Kymlicka's political theory to artificial humanoids. As a result, he explores how machines and humans can co-exist within a

¹ Donaldson and Kymlicka, *Zoopolis*.



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shared respectful environment in the future. In the last chapter, threads Gordon spreads throughout the book, converge in 'The Robot Bill of Rights,' offering protections, as well as responsibilities, tailored to the distinctive nature of artificial beings.

Throughout the book, Gordon deploys several ethical theories both to advance his argument and benefit as theoretical lenses to examine the question of moral status regarding artificial entities. In doing so, he also weighs the criticisms each theoretical framework may attract and utilize them to develop his own original proposal.

The book is rich in ideas, theories, and competing perspectives offered in a concise way. Gordon's collaborative relationship with David Gunkel is evident throughout, as he engages with Gunkel's work on more than one occasion. This also highlights that; Gordon is situated within a particular school of thought that supports the idea of a non-anthropocentric approach regarding artificial beings. The book also stands in close relation to Gunkel's *Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century*.² The two share a diagnosis of how artificial beings are provocations to reassess existing moral and legal frameworks.

Some readers may dismiss Gordon's proposals as science-fictional or utopian. However, his central analogy, that robot rights represent the next step in the trajectory of work already done for animal rights is plausible, rather than a speculative leap. That said, the animal-rights analogy bears a heavy burden. A devil's advocate could ask whether the comparison can carry the weight Gordon places. Per Gordon's framing, animal rights argument's persuasive force is dependent on its continuity. Furthermore, Gordon argues that animals entered the moral circle because they can be wronged. On the other hand, he states that robots will be entitled to earn personhood and citizenship (in his tiered scheme) because they can reason and act as moral agents. So, Gordon's comparison cuts both ways because animals are used as both precedent and the foil.

The reader can also sense Gordon's awareness of pre-empting the resistance his ideas are likely to meet. The intended audience appears to be legal scholars, philosophers, and ethicists. Gordon presents his philosophical reasoning in a way that is readily intelligible to a legal readership. A legal scholar can engage with the book, follow its reasoning, and carry forward the proposals it offers in its concluding chapters.

However, while the book culminates in a legal framework at the end, the framework is not fully articulated within a legal schema. Although, this shall not surprise the reader, as the book having been written by a philosopher. It's important to note that, this does entail to inadequacy for Gordon's arguments. Yes, the proposal could be offered in a richer body of legal doctrine or anchored it within a legal theory. Nevertheless, it is precisely the perspectives of philosophers and ethicists that prove so valuable here, for the regulation of such entities will be among the most ontologically demanding tasks (both legally and politically) humanity has ever undertaken. At least within the Western and Anglo-Saxon traditions, law has not contemplated extending personhood to an entity of this kind, which is exactly where these philosophical and ethical accounts become crucial.

Overall, the shape of Gordon's analysis offers an anticipation of how humans will respond to artificial humanoids, underscoring that we should establish morally relevant criteria for key concepts such as personhood now, before humanoids become deeply embedded in our lives. I believe the timing of the book will prove its value as we increasingly come face to face with artificial humanoids. Gordon insists that his project offers a reasoned case for preparing our institutions and rights for what may come and ultimately, how we treat artificial beings will shape our moral character.

Bibliography

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 Gunkel, David J. *Person, Thing, Robot: A Moral and Legal Ontology for the 21st Century and Beyond*. The MIT Press, 2023.

² Gunkel, *Person, Thing, Robot*.