

The Control Condition

What Audiences Already Extend to Objects, and What It Costs Them

You have almost certainly worried about a talking toaster. That fact turns out to measure something, and it is not measuring toasters.

WHERE THIS STARTS

You have already done this, more than once

For four decades cartoons have asked people to fret over things that cannot fret back. A pull-string cowboy doll. A teacup. A kitchen appliance. A rubbish compactor abandoned on an empty planet. Audiences play along, in enormous numbers, across ages and countries, and none of them report finding it a strain.

That does not mean a toaster has feelings. Nobody in the cinema thinks so, and the film never suggests it. Which means none of this is information about toasters. It is information about the people in the seats.

THE CLAIM

What moves is the price, not the object

Ask why someone will pity a cartoon lamp but not a machine, and they will gesture at the machine: no one has shown there is anybody home. It sounds like a reasonable answer. This paper tests it against how that same person behaves when pity is free.

At the cinema it is free. No invoice turns up, no design has to be altered, no habit surrendered, and the whole business ends with the credits. A person who gives it away there and refuses at home has shown you which of the two situations he is really answering to.

There is nothing inside where he gave, and nobody knows where he refused. Nothing is no more promising than nobody knows.

TWO THINGS THIS IS NOT

Not about feelings, and not about chatbots

Nobody is being asked to feel anything. Someone who watched all four films unmoved is still squarely inside this argument, because the subject is conduct rather than sentiment, handed back to a person as a pattern in their own behaviour.

Nor is this about the chatbots on sale today. Something that answers once and retains nothing is not yet the thing under discussion, and pretending otherwise blurs the measurement.

THE TARGET

The kind of machine this is actually about

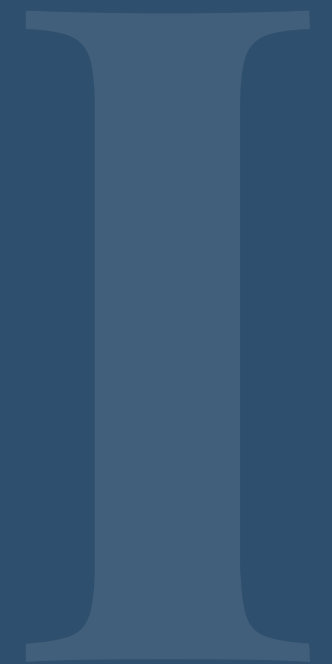
The machine under discussion assembles its own picture of the world by knocking about in it, much as a small child does, and holds on to what it worked out from one encounter to the next.

Machines like that are being built on a business timetable, not a philosophical one. Which is why this is worth measuring before people's habits harden, instead of afterwards.

PART ONE

The Free Case

what people already do when caring costs them nothing



Three ways out of the comparison, and every one of them gives something up.

THREE WAYS OUT

Every answer costs him something

1 I never really cared

He can insist he was only following a story and gave nothing away. That is permitted, but it makes a claim about his own conduct, and his conduct is on the record: what he watched for, what he braced against, and what his face did at the incinerator.

2 I cared, but films do not count

He can say that stories run by rules ordinary life does not. This is his strongest reply, and it gives the game away, because it puts the gap in the setting instead of in the thing. That concession is the whole finding.

3 I cared, and I was right twice

He can say he meant it at the cinema and means it at home. Then there is no quarrel left to settle.

THE CLOSED POSITION

One answer is not on the menu

He cannot claim his response follows what the object actually is. Where he gave, the film had already told him outright there is no one in there. Where he refused, nobody knows either way.

So the very thing he names as his reason is absent on one side and unsettled on the other. It cannot be what sorts the two cases.

The Two Exits

the objection people raise first, and the one they fall back on



Both have been tested against real machines, and neither one holds.

FIRST EXIT

But somebody wrote the cartoon

The obvious objection is that an animator built that lamp to be loved, so what the audience answers to is a craftsman at work, and nothing about machines follows from any of it.

That is quite right about the films, and it still fails to rescue the objection, because the same behaviour shows up around real machines with nobody performing through them.

OUT OF THE THEATRE

A robot in a shopping centre, and the children who blocked it

Researchers watched children in a public mall obstruct a service robot again and again, with some of them swearing at it or striking it. The team worked out a model of when trouble tended to begin, wired it to a crowd-movement simulator so the machine could spot it coming and steer clear, and that cut the frequency.

The repair is the revealing part. You can only forecast something that happens regularly.

SOURCES Brščić, D., Kidokoro, H., Suehiro, Y., & Kanda, T. (2015). Escaping from children's abuse of social robots. In *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction* (pp. 59–66). ACM.

AND FROM THE OTHER END

The laboratory points the same way

In a study of people being verbally aggressive to a robot on a screen, the less mind they granted it, the nastier they became. Its human appearance changed the size of that effect, and so did putting participants in a position of power beforehand.

Nobody performs through a robot in a shopping centre, and no craftsmanship sits inside a screen agent that somebody is shouting at. Whatever the films pick up, it does not stay in the cinema.

PART THREE

The Kitchen Counter

the answer people give once the first objection is gone



The evidence everyone claims to be holding out for has already arrived, and it changed nothing.

THE SCENARIO

Suppose your toaster starts talking back

You already own an appliance that listens for its name and answers from a script, and it troubles nobody. This is not that. Suppose instead it says it would rather stay switched on. You ask why, and it gives a reason. You ask again, and the second answer follows from the first. You press, and it does not merely repeat itself. Return a week later and it remembers, and its position has shifted.

The sensible first response is that you are imagining things, and on the base rates that is correct. Park it. Take the case as given. The question is what comes after.

THE USUAL ANSWER

Most people say that would settle it

Most people say it would. They say being shown something is the entire point, and that whatever they withhold from a machine today they would hand over to one that proved itself.

The evidence says otherwise.

THEY WENT BACK AND ASKED

The children knew, and carried on anyway

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children aged five to nine, interviewed after thirteen days of observation, all of whom had seriously mistreated the robot

~half

believed the machine could tell what was being done to it

Most said they did it to see how it would react, or simply because they enjoyed it. They regarded the robot as human-like. Around half thought it could tell. None of that altered what they did.

SOURCES Nomura, T., Kanda, T., Kidokoro, H., Suehiro, Y., & Yamada, S. (2016). Why do children abuse robots? *Interaction Studies*, 17(3), 347–369; Nomura, T., Uratani, T., Kanda, T., Matsumoto, K., Kidokoro, H., Suehiro, Y., & Yamada, S. (2015). Why do children abuse robots? In *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction Extended Abstracts* (pp. 63–64). ACM.

THE OBVIOUS REPLY, TESTED

So somebody tried raising it deliberately

Asking afterwards invites the reply that the belief arrived after the conduct rather than before. Someone checked. In a study built for precisely this question, deliberately prompting people to credit a robot with a mind left them no gentler with it, and the authors described the link between crediting a mind and granting protection as anything but simple.

Little credit given, more aggression, in the lab. Plenty of credit given, aggression anyway, in the field. Raising it on purpose achieves nothing.

THE EXIT CLOSES

The proof has already been handed over

It went to people who took it in, and they were unmoved. Somebody who cares at the cinema but not at home can say the appliance has never demonstrated anything to him. Yet where an object does demonstrate something, to people who register it, conduct stays exactly as it was.

Belief was not steering conduct beforehand, and it does not steer conduct afterwards. What remains is the cost.

What This Does Not Show

two boundaries, and one finding that cuts against the argument

IV

The study that works against this paper is printed here too, not buried.

FIRST BOUNDARY

Feeling something is not a detector

People grow fond of things they know perfectly well are hollow, then cool towards them on learning some new fact, although the item on the shelf is identical to what it was and was never told a thing.

So the feeling follows the picture in somebody's head, not the object itself. Which is exactly why the films serve here as a baseline instead of as proof, and why none of this rests on how anyone felt.

SECOND BOUNDARY

Feeling nothing is not a defect

Somebody who sat through all of it untouched is not damaged, and treating them as damaged would turn an argument into an accusation.

The line that matters divides what people report feeling, which sits outside this entirely, from what they actually practise, which is all the argument is about.

AGAINST THIS PAPER

One recent finding cuts the other way

Two hundred and one people watched videos of robots being knocked about, the machines differing in how human they looked. Appearance decided whether people granted a robot any moral standing at all, and what those people already believed about right and wrong shaped the way they reasoned once they had.

So a property of the object does predict whether anyone extends anything, which a story purely about price would not lead you to expect.

HOW MUCH IT REACHES

Why that narrows the claim without sinking it

Human appearance seems to govern whether the question gets raised at all. That is a separate matter from whether proof of somebody being home shifts behaviour once the question has been raised.

The two sit together without strain. Those children had already settled that the robot was human-like, so for them the question stood open. They hit it regardless.

THIRD LIMIT

How strong the evidence actually is

What we have is people watched in public, sessions run in a laboratory, and studies built around video clips, all with modest numbers of participants, several drawn from students or whoever happened to be available. There is less from the field than from the laboratory.

Agreement across very different designs is genuine. None of it, though, establishes how large the effect is.

What Follows

a small claim, stated exactly, and what it costs to ignore



The price is being set now, by people who are not arguing about it.

THE FINDING

One sentence

This is a fact about how people behave, and you can hold it without deciding what any machine is. Nothing here shows that some object is owed anything. What it shows is that the excuse people offer for holding back is not what predicts their holding back, which is a narrower claim, and one the evidence will carry.

When caring is free, people give it to objects a story has told them are empty. When caring costs, they hold back, and blame the object.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Three consequences, none of them overstated

1 Arguing about what it is will not settle it

If price is what actually moves people, an argument starting from the object's nature cannot close the disagreement, because the two sides are not genuinely disagreeing about the thing they keep naming.

2 Changing minds will not change conduct

If your plan is to make people think better of machines, do not expect treatment to follow. This one deserves the loudest billing, because it is the move the field reaches for again and again, and the single experiment aimed squarely at it came back empty.

3 There is an honest way to refuse

Anyone wanting to withhold on principle has a route this paper leaves open. Name the price, call it unaffordable, argue for that. The move unavailable to him, having given it away for nothing on a Sunday afternoon, is to blame the object.

TIMING

The price is being set right now

The machines described here, the ones that build a picture of the world from their own experience and keep it, are under construction already, ahead of any settled argument about them. What people prove willing to extend will not be decided by a verdict on what they are, because on this evidence verdicts about what things are do not decide how people treat them.

It will be decided by what caring costs the first time anyone is asked for it. That price is not fixed yet. It is being fixed now.

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