

Book Review

## Person, Thing, Robot

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

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David Gunkel has been questioning the traditional assumptions about cyberspace, machines, and artificial intelligence models for over a decade now. As a moral philosopher and communications expert, Gunkel, rightly, challenges the traditional Western ontology that has been intertwined with modern AI and robotics. In 2012, Gunkel published the first two works (*The Machine Question*, and 2018 *Robot Rights*), both of which called into question the current moral and ethical frameworks for thinking about machines. *Person, Thing, Robot* is the third installment to this trilogy of works. It is a work of ontology but also of deconstruction, for it takes the question of the ontology of humans and machines further by asking why *objects* do not fit neatly into the order of things. Gunkel also seeks to drive a hard wedge between the binaries of humans and machines that have long plagued the thinking around technology like AI and robots. How does Gunkel approach this endeavor?

Like any great work of philosophy, Gunkel's work begins with a proper framing of terms and narratives around things and objects (i.e., robots) debate. As Gunkel has done in other works, he notes that science fiction has immense shaping power in the current ontologies about machines (p. 8). How one frames the arguments and debates about persons, things, and robots reveals their axiological assumptions. The most common assumption is that within current binaries between person and object, *persons* are privileged, no matter what side of the debate (i.e., "Critics" and "Advocates") one stands on. Gunkel does not intend to argue for or against either side or provide a view of mediation. His premise is to question and challenge the dichotomy of person/thing within ethnocentrism.

Beginning with *things* in chapter 2, Gunkel examines how critics and advocates situate and characterize things. Chapter 3, again, asks the question of whether robots are persons. On a folk psychological level, the term *person* is often employed to mean *human moral person*, but that usage is not exhaustive of the etymology of the word, as we see in its Latin stem *persona* (i.e., a character or role). Gunkel notes early on in the work that

this folk usage is challenged by current patient law and even the usage of personal delivery robots (i.e., Starlink).

In chapters 4 and 5, the work further investigates the personification of AI systems and robots. How does modernity quantify what it means to be a natural or artificial person? Gunkel's work here highlights the Critic and the Advocate's standards of delimiting individual properties and capacities as the ultimate litmus test of moral consideration. The Critic assumes that "person-making properties" will never happen, and the Advocate assumes that said benchmarks will come to pass, it is merely a matter of time. The 5th chapter considers the concept of legal personhood. Here there is not a set of properties or capacities but rather a recognition by governing authority. Again, Gunkel is seeking to show the reader the real issue in the language game that both Critics and Advocates are playing. There is no ultimate solution to this problem or dilemma. However, as chapter 6 explores, there is an alternative viewpoint employed by most of the antiquity—slavery. Gunkel calls this the Slavery 2.0 argument (cf. Gunkel 2018). Gunkel shows in this chapter the issues of trying to re-image the Greco-Roman slave laws in light of AI systems and machines. Seeing robots as slaves, according to Gunkel, "Efforts to repurpose the concept and legal institutions of slavery to deal with the social challenges of AI systems and robots can only be made from and in service to a particular cultural norm. And this way of thinking can only be normalized and extended to other cultures and ways of being in the world through a kind of presumptuous act that risks reproducing the injustices and injuries of colonialism" (p. 151).

The book ends on a destructive note by attempting to *deconstruct* the person/thing dichotomy. One must remember, least frustration ensues, that Derridean deconstruction is not about dismantling to reconstruct, but a destroying in order that new *outcomes* are possible. Thus, Gunkel's final chapter in the trilogy is not a *solution* as much as it is a means to tear down the web of thought that has held the social imagination captive since cybernetics. Gunkel sees this deconstruction as a pathway toward asking the best possible questions, and sometimes in the task of philosophy this means dissolving problematic ways of thinking about problems (p. 179). Indeed, but does the work deliver the philosophical *goods*, so to speak, necessary to help modernity think anew about the old problems of situating people, things, and robots?

Gunkel's book delivers in several ways, I will mention two. First, much like Virgil is a guide to Dante in purgatory, Gunkel is our philosophical guide through this period of technological mediation. The wide breadth of legal, philosophical, and literary references bears witness to the pedagogical value of Gunkel's work in this volume. Gunkel has been writing and teaching on this subject for over a decade, and I dare say that there is no better voice to heed in the growing existential crisis over AI systems and robots. The brilliance of what Gunkel is doing here (and has been since 2012) by asking questions about machines is providing a type of neutral space for rethinking how things

are and how things might be. In this trilogy, we are asked to consider systems and artifacts, but the model could apply to other subjects as well. Gunkel's ultimate concern, per evidence in the trilogy, is that those in privileged positions (i.e., humans) take responsibility for things we make and how those things remake us.

Second, I recommend this work because words matter. As a theologian writing and researching the intersection of faith and technology, I am sympathetic to Gunkel's concern about making sure we are asking the right questions. Presupposition in the realm of exegesis has literally led to countless assassinations, bigotry, violence, and quietism throughout the history of religious interpretation. I foresee the same dangers in wake of the mounting debates about the person/thing dichotomy. We do not need advanced AI systems or robotics to test the potential harmfulness of ethical washing and moral vacuums that simple mathematical models can make. Gunkel is right about the problematic logic of binary thinking, it embeds artificial dichotomies. I have read Gunkel's works for many years now, and this work is no less what I come to expect in his publications, carefulness, and clairvoyance. In the robotics literature, even though it is thin respectively unlike other fields, nuance is a nuisance. Fortunately, Gunkel sees nuisance as a friend and welcomes them to the table in all his works, and *Person, Thing, Robot* is no exception. What the reader gets in this work is over a decade of research within the fields of robotics, communications, legal theory, and phenomenology. There are even a few mentions of theological resources within this work. Of course, as a theologian, I am always looking for more interaction between moral philosophy and theology.

Who is this work for? Because of the breadth of this work, I foresee it primarily in the hands of the academic, but it would be a shame for those to be the only hands that turn its pages. There are many academic fields that would find this work of relevance to their research, a few include the following: jurisprudence, philosophy, economics, communications, anthropology, theology, and of course computer science. The only concern I have about the work that Gunkel has produced in *Person, Thing, Robot*, is that the very reason the book was written is that Western ontologies of persons and humans struggle with self-examination.

Gunkel's work is of utmost importance for the modern ontological crisis we find ourselves in. I have no doubts it is a work that will serve society well. The hope of reframing the narrative of AI, robotics, and personhood that leads to flourishing begins with a hard assessment of our ontological commitments. There are serious ethical implications for ignoring the content of this work. There is no political agenda to be made in *Person, Thing, Robot*, just ground-breaking moral philosophy to guide our ontologies toward the future.