

BE KIND TO OURSELF

The Idea of Robots

Czech writer Karel Capek introduced the term 'Robot' in English language for the first time in his 1920s science fiction play R.U.R.¹ (Rossum's Universal Robots). He borrowed the term from Czech word 'Robota', which essentially meant forced labour². In the present age of machines and AI, the term robot is widely used for denoting 'computer programmable machines which resemble humans and are capable of replicating certain human movements and functions automatically' or to connote the idea of a 'person who behaves mechanically or unemotionally.'

In today's times when we are dealing with robots in our day to day lives, to deconstruct the discourse around the term Robot has become more relevant and imperative than it was hundred years ago. For a cursory glance the connotation of the term appears to have undergone considerable changes since its inception but if one dives deeper, one can easily find the original idea of 'forced labour' lying in its underbelly, stronger than ever.

The only difference is that now the original idea of 'Robota' is at work under a different garb. Back in 1920s the players of the game (forced labour) were more obvious and easy to call out. It was the privileged landlords and nobles at one side and the deprived poor landless labourers on the other side. The people were traded as slaves and kept as a bonded labour for generations at the terms of the masters. The idea of forced labour has now seeped so deep into our discourse that we do not recognise it anymore. The prevalent discourse primarily driven by the notions of creating new highs of success, career, money, power and then raising the bar every passing moment has rendered many of us human robots. In a primarily capitalistic society, where the only indicator of growth is ever increasing capital, we are constantly being conditioned to pursue more materialistic gains at the cost of basic human tenets. The prevalent ideology and discourse are calling the shots here and the most scary part is that all of us are being made to believe that it is our own strive for our own betterment whereas it is actually is a rat race in disguise with no end. The culprits of forced labour now are operating deep within, so calling out and challenging them is not as easy as it was with Karel Capek.

To strive for personal and humankind's overall betterment is a worthy idea, but where do we draw the line? The current rat race of success, career and capital has no end in sight. Most of us are already a part of the race. The people in the race can be segmented into two broad categories.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R.U.R.>
2. https://www.google.co.in/search?rlz=1C5CHFA_enIN729IN730&ei=9mIrW_LDloH9v_ATSwrKABw&q=define+robot&oq=define+robot&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0j0i7i30k1j0i0i7i30k1l2j0i0i7i30k1l4.2553.4823.0.5436.7.7.0.0.0.157.855.0j6.6.0....0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..1.6.853...0i7i10i30k1j0i13k1.0.SJ6d30Pp3GI

First, there are people who are into jobs and are at other's command. Most of them are made to work tirelessly on somebody else's vision. Long work hours and the constant pressure to meet the deadlines in order to emerge as the best employee is leaving people with no time for themselves. Overtime, due to lack of interest and vision most of them are reduced to automated operators working for their EMI's. The lack of time and introspection is the prime cause of people behaving in a mechanical and unemotional manner. This is in turn creating more and more robots in human skin.

Second, there are people who address themselves as businessperson, entrepreneurs and changemakers. These are self motivated and passionate people working relentlessly to achieve their self set goals. As they themselves are in-charge, they are more than happy to work to any extreme. While they are pushing it beyond limits, they expect and push their subordinates as well to match them. In the process of attaining these self set goals, the first thing to go out of window is time. With less time for oneself they also start functioning mechanically. What makes them different from the first kind of people is their illusion of self satisfaction and fulfillment of their vision. Happy or dull, both classes are becoming more mechanical and unemotional.

In Karel's play Rossum's Universal Robots, a man called Rossum, while on an island accidentally discovered a material which exactly behaved like protoplasm except that it did not mind getting knocked around. This happens around 1930s in the play. Excited with the discovery, Rossum tried to create a dog and a man but to no avail. His nephew came to see him and he shared the news with his nephew. The idea of making big money by creating human robots in big numbers to cater the large industries struck the young Rossum. They fought a lot over the idea as old Rossum just wanted to create animals to prove that God was not necessary for life and did not exist in the first place. Young Rossum was adamant and grew more ambitious overtime. Finally he locked up old Rossum in the laboratory and went on to make big money by creating mutants and human robots in bulk for the large industries. I see the young and old Rossum, both existing simultaneously inside every person around. But for majority of us, we have let the young Rossum take over. If money was not an incentive, I am not sure how many of us would still be doing the things we do?

Today the increasing role of machines and robots is a mere physical manifestation of our capital driven machine ideology. The way we relentlessly chase the idea of career, success and prosperous life has already converted us into robots in human skin. The multitude and magnitude of core human emotions is facing a drastic decrease especially in the sections driven by the endless rat race.

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Humans in a Robot Society

Emotions Versus Logic

Humans are born with inherited emotions and conditioned with logic for a modest survival in a formal civil society. At the core we are driven by emotions which are overtaken or guided by logic wherever our conditioning deems it necessary. Robots on the other hand are built on logic. With the development in Artificial Intelligence and machine learning we are trying to embed them with advanced algorithms that can most closely replicate human intelligence, functions and behaviour. Every passing day we are creating robots which are more advanced and can easily compete humans at a range of aspects including intelligence. Anything built on logic is likely to stick to it for its survival. Any issues within the logic would be termed as an error. It is very easy to classify something as an error in a machine, whereas the basic fabric of humans being emotion, almost nothing could be labelled as absolute error.

The Time for Oneself

Once the AI is so advanced that it can infuse the machines with basic human emotions, the main difference between the robots and humans would be time. A robot will never have its own time. Like its existence, all its time is meant for its master. On the other hand humans as we see it today are likely to have time for themselves. The more time we have for ourselves the more we can maintain our uniqueness in a society where human look-a-like robots would be present everywhere in our lives. However mechanical we may have become, we keep coming back to the core whenever we utilise a bit of time for ourselves. The periodic introspection keeps our consciousness and existential well being intact.

The Way Forward: Be Kind to Yourself

As a species, humans have evolved thus far through fierce competition and survived to rule the earth by overpowering all other life forms as we see on earth today. We claim to have been able to do so by virtue of our intelligence. The millions of years of struggle and the bid for survival against other species has left a deep scar on human psychology. Though humans at present are undisputedly more than ruling the earth, we are still in competition mode. In the absence of any external challenge to our

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survival, we have started competing within ourselves, under a different garb but with the same intensity. Innumerable wars, bloodsheds, poverty and famines are all mere manifestations of this ongoing competitive legacy, we often come across in our history books. Current conflicts around the globe, wages disparity, racial oppression, child labour, rising hunger index, labour exploitation, communal and ethnic conflicts are the present day newspaper headlines counterparts of these themes at a macro level.

If we analyse our lives carefully at a micro level, we will find the same themes operating almost at the same intensity. Our individual lives are completely overtaken by the dominant discourse of perfection, success, wealth and career to name a few. With the call of our alarm clock, we walk up every morning like an automated living being and get busy with our so meticulously planned and revered schedule. We try our best to make sure that nothing happens unplanned. The worst nightmare of the present day corporate style generation could be anything going out of their planned schedule. Education planning, career planning, health planning, retirement planning, family planning, wealth planning and so on, we are trying really hard to make our life a minutely detailed and planned event. In the process we are steadily coding the human brain with the same logic that was meant for Robots.

Apart from physical movements, what makes humans a unique life form are intelligence, consciousness and emotions. In the context of humans versus robots, the later are already catching up on the intelligence front. With the ongoing efforts in artificial intelligence and machine learning, I can easily see a world in the next couple of decades, where robots equipped with basic human tenets and conscious of their existence and identity would be an inevitable part of human life. The question of maintaining a unique human identity will then entirely play out in the last domain, i.e. emotions.

In order to be able to preserve the diversity and carry forward the highly sophisticated human emotions, we will have to learn from the age old saying 'Be kind to others'. Now is the high time that we adopt a reverse model of this saying in our individual lives. 'Be kind to oneself or yourself' is one of the many propositions that can help us stay human. All of us will have to start in our individual spaces and lives. We will have to learn to be kind to ourselves. We need to draw the line for ourselves, as in today's highly individualized world no one else will be able to guide or help us.

We need to break free of the paradigm of perfection. Only a machine can replicate the same result innumerable with the same degree of perfection, as it's scope is based on a limited and highly precise logic. Humans are much more complex and

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developed machines which tend to deliver different results all because of their inbuilt creativity. When a robot cannot replicate the same result, it is termed as an error within the logic. Of late, we have started looking at ourselves with the same gaze. We will have to reverse this dangerous trend. We will start appreciating the diversity within the human conditioning and the way it operates to create stunningly different results for the same parameters. We will have to get over with the notion of perfectionism. Rather than trying to be perfect, we shall devote our time on exploring our hidden talents and capabilities. Let imperfection be the new trend.

We need to get over with the discourse that talks about specialization. The recent phenomenon of professionals specialising into certain fields so much so that the other aspects of their lives go haywire is not a good sign for us as humans. We as humans cannot be all rounder if we as individuals are not all rounders. Lets restore the tradition of being multitaskers who could deal with plethora of situations. We have made highly specialized and precise machines (robots) so that we can get certain tasks executed at such frequency and scale to considerably bring down our operating cost and make our lives easier.

We need to do away with the notion of being successful with a settled career. This endless rat race is severely killing the humane aspects of our lives. We should of course not push ourselves so much so that we are rendered biological robots in human skins. Let's start with more time to ourselves. The more time for introspection will put things in perspective. Lets get over with the set formulas. Only machines can sustain on formulas not real humans. We need to unlearn the existing formulas to learn the way to being more human. We need to be kind to ourselves by deciding our own limits. We need to opt out of this endless rat race. The sooner the better. We shall increase the frequency of unplanned breaks in our lives. Our near and dear ones need more of our time than our projects and business leads. Our kids need their parents more than the start-ups need their CEOs. We shall be able to put a check on worldly ambitions only when we are kind enough to ourselves. We can be benevolent to others only when we are kind enough to ourselves. Being kind to others will help us in not pushing people beyond a limit.

Since a robot is created to be at its master's disposal round the clock and work tirelessly, it will never have the virtue of being kind to itself. Even if with the help of some bug the robots attain independence from human mastership, like they did in Rossum's Universal Robots, they will keep working tirelessly. Robots may initiate a mutiny against humans, overpower humans or eliminate humans altogether and takeover the earth but they are likely to never have the luxury of time for themselves

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and in turn being kind to their own self. There will be a world of constant work and more work.

Together we shall learn to ride on the back of technology, rather than letting it dictate our lives. After all robots (technological advancement) are made to relieve us and not to relegate us.

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