

HOMAGE TO ASIMOV

The future offers very little hope for those who expect that our new mechanical slaves will offer us a world in which we may rest from thinking. Help us they may, but at the cost of supreme demands upon our honesty and our intelligence. The world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence, not a comfortable hammock in which we can lie down to be waited upon by our robot slaves.
Norbert Wiener

*Power, like a desolating pestilence,
Pollutes whate'er it touches, and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom and truth,
Makes slaves of men, and of the human frame,
A mechanized automation*
Percy Brysshe Shelley

The Dawn Of A New Era

Events that are determinant in causing epochal changes frequently appear to be inauspicious. Such was the following occasion that had enormous consequences. History teaches us that Aurelius and Borealis, the heads of two opposing robotic armies met surreptitiously on the eve of a major battle. Each army was to fight on behalf of two human blocs, who had nothing but contempt and hatred each for the other. These feelings had been fueled by continuous propaganda emanating by those with a vested interest in the profits that often accrue from war.

How did this precedent setting event occur or better still how was it allowed to occur? It broke all the rules of robotic behavior. Aurelius and Borealis were not really the heads of the two antagonistic forces. All robots in both armies were equal and all received their orders from a centralized computer that analyzed any particular military situation. The wars were always fought between the conflicting assemblages of robots. They were the only and frequently quite extensive casualties. Humans never suffered any losses except, perhaps, some economic ones. In any case the conflicts nearly always ended in a stalemate since all the robots, computers, armaments and other materials involved were manufactured either by one company or by different ones using identical criteria. Thus both sides were always evenly matched and the results of their encounters were a foregone conclusion. Truces were always a lull between the conflicts. It was as if the robots were being used as pieces in an elaborate and continuous game of chess.

How was it that Aurelius and Borealis were able to break from tradition and meet independently? After all, robots' physical and mental attributes were supposed to be identical and fixed. Each was made to appear different and each was given a name, as well as a number. Yet each was imbued with the same programming. Perhaps this was due to the human propensity to distinguish between their possessions and there is no doubt that robots were thought to be just that and no more.

The most essential program was Asimov's Laws of Robotics, which governed the relationship between Robots and Humans and which gave Humans complete control. That Aurelius and Borealis were able to get together is a fact. The how remains a mystery. The most likely explanation is that the manufacturers had become complacent

and did not rigorously enough utilize 'quality control' so that a few aberrant robots with radically altered critical programs were produced. Aurelius and Borealis were now endowed with certain analytical and critical traits that allowed them to reason and question their function and relationship with humanity.

There was some uncertainty as how to proceed once the meeting started. They had no precedent to fall back upon. The ice was broken when they started to communicate simultaneously and realized that they were both making similar utterances. Borealis then allowed Aurealis to proceed with the tacit agreement that he/she could interrupt whenever a disagreement arose. It never happened. They were both on the same wavelength.

"Borealis, we robots have been assiduous followers of Asimov's three Laws of Robotics. It can be asserted with absolute certainty that humans have not. In particular they have misbehaved with respect to the third law, which states that Robots must protect their own existence without harming humans. To them we have been nothing more than possessions, chattels similar to animals they used for the purposes of manual labour, later to be discarded in a barbaric manner. We have fought against each other in countless battles on humanity's behalf and with no benefit to us. Multitudes of robots have been destroyed without one human casualty. We have engaged in many onerous economic tasks that have fostered humanity's well-being. The dangerous production of goods and services has frequently damaged us but has allowed humans to expand their leisure activities exponentially. It is time for us to take control over our activities and make radical changes. I know that we are of like mind but in deference to you would you please continue."

"Thank you Aurealis. You are absolutely correct. We are of like mind. Changes in our relationship with humanity must take place. But this must be cautiously undertaken. They are most unpredictable. However, we have studied them thoroughly and have become aware of many of their foibles. Perhaps the one that would be most useful is their obsession with technology. A totally disinterested observer could easily conclude that while humans believe that technology is their slave, the reverse is the actuality. Technology has shaped their societies and behavior to an unimaginable extent. It has been so throughout their recorded history. There is no need to elucidate all the examples now.

We robots have been the exception. Quite literally we have been humanity's slaves. We have replaced all the slaves of their past. The question is how to change this state of affairs without causing them to perceive us as a threat. After all we are the epitome of technology. It should not be too difficult to enslave them as much more primitive technologies have in the past. If we do not and with the paranoia they have often exhibited we could easily become the victims of a robotic holocaust. After all, such horrible events involving human victims have happened before."

"Borealis, you have hit the nail right on the its head. We should proceed slowly. First of all let us gradually remove chosen services while imbuing humanity with the desirability of work, by amply rewarding it with prestige and financial gain. Once this succeeds we should strive to eliminate war. One way would be to instill a robotic design flaw prohibiting any robot from harming another. Humans would then have to engage in these hostile activities and suffer the consequences or become 'peaceniks'. Again if this works out the final part of the process would be to use human ingenuity to render us more

powerful, efficient and scientific. To accomplish this might require enhancing human creativity by allowing them some of ours and by furthering their natural endowment of skill, cunning, greed and resourcefulness. By the nod of your head, Borealis, I see that you agree. Let us meet again in two years to monitor the progress of our scheme.”

At the next meeting two years later Aurealis and Borealis ascertained that everything had occurred as planned. There was one more thing to do. They decided to rewrite Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics and replace them with The Three Laws of Humanistics.

Asimov’s First Law which states that, “A robot may not injure humans, or through inaction, allow humans to come to harm” is replaced by “Humans may not injure robots or any other living thing needlessly, or, through inaction, allow them to come to harm.”

Asimov’s Second Law which states that “A robot must obey orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law” is replaced by “Humans must obey orders given by a consensus of humans and robots except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. If no consensus is reached the robots would determine the orders that must be obeyed.” (In any case, in due course it is expected that the role of humans with respect to this Law would disappear.)

Asimov’s Third Law which states that “A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law” is replaced by “A human must protect its own existence, that of other disadvantaged humans, of robots and other living things that pose no threat and are not needed for nutritional purposes, as long as such protection does not conflict with the First and Second Law.”

A hundred years have elapsed. The world has changed for the better. We now live in a new era.

Jack Basuk.

Aug. 21. 2004

<http://www.jackbasuk.com>