

Social Robots and Religion:

The Case of Judaism

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ABSTRACT

In this short position paper we outline issues that may arise in taking into consideration for Social Robots and Religion. We take as a case study the example of Judaism. We look at areas dictated by Jewish Law and Jewish custom and leave as out of scope for this paper questions of Jewish ethics. We provide examples of areas which could benefit from adaptation to Jewish religious stereotypes. Awareness of these issues can benefit future robot-human interaction designers.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Embedded and cyber-physical systems->Robotics->Robotic autonomy *Social and professional topics->User characteristics->Cultural characteristics

KEYWORDS

Social Robot, Judaism, Halacha, Personalization

1 The Challenges

In this short position paper we wish to stimulate awareness of what we believe is a neglected issue. Social Robots are playing a greater role in society. This can mean in the future, Social Robots performing tasks for humans inside the home. An area that hasn't been given much thought in the implementation of such robots are what factors does religion prescribe or suggest regarding personalization of such robots [1]. We take as a case study the religion of Judaism, though there is no doubt in our minds that this can be applied to other religions as well. We describe and provide three areas which can provide input into the personalization process. The first category relates to Jewish Law (Halacha) and its implications for human – social robot interaction. The second category is Jewish Culture/Customs, which may be outside the realm of Jewish law but relate to items such as customs (minhagim)

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and cultural items, and can govern social interaction. The third category is that of Jewish ethics, which address different ethical considerations that can arise out of human-robot interaction [2]. This third category will not be addressed in the short paper as it has been addressed in various papers.

2 Robots and Jewish Law

Halacha (Jewish law) is highly prescriptive and covers many facets of daily life concerning both rituals and acceptable behaviors. It is not strictly observed by all the Jewish people, but partially observed (even in a cultural sense as opposed to a ritual duty) by many. Thus there is great need for personalization here. In the area of Jewish law decisors (“poskim”) will need to determine what is proper Jewish law for the use of robots as proxies[3]. Interestingly enough, certain questions have been debated through the story of the Golem (a man created creature/robot) [2]. Questions have arosed in the literature such as can a Golem be part of a human quorum. These questions open themselves to personalization as different “poskim” may have different views on the subject, especially since these are cutting level of decisions which do not have an agreed consensus and different people have different levels of observance. If we leave aside the broader question of whether a robot has human rights and responsibilities; broad categories of robot actions can be those associated with automation and a robot acting as a proxy in both daily actions and ritualistic actions.

Many examples of possible interaction may concern themselves with Shabbat observance and automation[4]. What activities may a robot do that an observant Jew would be forbidden to do (e.g. turning on lights). What can a robot be instructed to do on Shabbat and what may he be instructed to do prior to Shabbat.

The category of Jewish law which deals with causation (“Grama”), deals with questions to what level of causation is robotic action. Some of these questions have been dealt with in regard to voice activated switches and other automated devices. There are certain categories of actions which may be hinted to but may not be explicitly said. A religiously aware robot must understand such hints. A religiously aware robot may need to know what is allowed and not allowed and refuse to do such actions or at least make their human owners aware of the problems. In addition to technical feasibility of certain actions there is concern with Shabbat atmosphere, thus letting a TV play from the beginning of Shabbat

may be “halachically” allowable it would be disallowed because of its violation of Shabbat mood.

Another area of interaction which Jewish law may apply is robots standing in as proxies for their human owners. Can they perform such ritualistic activities for their owners, such as: saying prayers, blessings, sounding the ram’s horn (shofar), donating to charity, and serving divorce papers? The halachic category for these types of interaction is agency (“Shaliach”).

Some of these issues have theoretical precedents, but these will need to be honed as practical cases come to realization on a larger scale.

3 Robots and Jewish Customs

In this section we want to address item which are not governed strictly by Jewish law can be influenced by Jewish customs and conventions (minhagim). Some of these have relationships with questions of Jewish law, while others can be independent of Halacha. One needs to be aware that there is also a greater geocultural diversity among the Jewish people (i.e. Ashkenazim, Italiano, Sepharadim, Temanim, Ethiopian) with respect to customs.

An example of these might be: 1) How to address different members of the family (Rabbi, Hacham, Adon, Mr, given name). 2) During periods of mourning there are customs of not speaking to the mourner first. 3) There are times during certain rituals when the surrounding participants are silent or may answer amen at the end. 4) There are certain phrases that are used for certain occasions such as “Mazal Tov” (good luck/ congratulations), “B’sha Tova” (In the proper time). Another category could be Jewish expletives such as: “Oy Vey” or “L’Azazel”. In addition, there are certain situations that are not mentioned due to customs of “Ayin Hara” (fear of evil eye) and other issues that may not be proper to discuss in public due to issues of modesty.

A lot of customs arise around the issue of food. Different geocultural groups may have different foods for certain Jewish holidays such as sufganiyot (donuts for Chanukah), kreplach (filled dough pasties for Sukkot), different foods as omens (for the Jewish New Year). Certain foods may be permitted for one group but forbidden by others such as rice on Passover. A robot preparing food would need to be aware of the above issues.

Another element, concerns appearances e.g. head covering for male (yarmulke) or married females. Additional clothing might be ritual fringes or other items of sectarian dress (though not required for a robot, may make their owners more accepting of the robot). In addition, tattoos might be frowned upon.

4 Implications

The implication here from all of these examples is that a designer of a general purpose home robot be aware of these interactions and

prepare for them. They may so numerous that it may be impossible to pre-program all of them, but allowances should be made for allowing a robot to be trained to be religiously aware. A robot, so constructed, would find itself in a better position to serve its owners and perhaps be more accepted by them [5].

Each of the three categories we have proposed may require different methods of training. The first could rely on some sort of structuring and then derivation from formalized Jewish Books of Law. The second might involve more free form learning from Jewish Responsa texts. While the third because of the vastness and variability might only be derived from learning by examples.

This is a field which needs to evolve. For example, take the light bulb in the refrigerator which is turned on by opening the door. In the beginning people manually unscrewed the light bulb or taped the switch. Then came refrigerators which could be programmed to turn off lights for 24 hours. The latest technology has a holiday and Shabbat calendar built-in and automatically turns off and on the lights automatically. Another example is The app Tefilon is also a good example, as it provides the right prayer for the time, and even give you remarks such as “are you sure you want to pray the afternoon prayer? The time has passed”. Here too with robots, we can imagine initial versions having to ask exactly what to do, while further advances will allow a robot to deduce what he should do.

Another preparation that must be done is by Jewish Law (Halachic) decisors, they need to prepare the groundwork of deciding what are the applicable laws with respect to social robots (what are they allowed to do, how they may be instructed). There are organizations that make it their purview to deal with such issues such as Tzomet (<http://tzomet.org.il>). The issues discussed above could be generalized to other religions under the categories of: Religious law, customs and culture. The awareness of these issues are in very early stage and much thought will need to be given to their realization and implementation.

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