

Don't Hurt That Robot! How Morality Muddles Perception of a Mind

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LiveScience:

Although people can't directly experience the consciousness of another, they take for granted that other people have minds — that others can think, remember, experience pleasure and feel pain.

People, however, don't typically attribute such minds to robots, corpses and other beings with no apparent consciousness, except if these beings are put in harm's way, new research suggests.

In a series of experiments by Harvard University researchers, people were more likely to ascribe the characteristics of an active mind to non-conscious beings when they were intentionally victimized than when they were unharmed. Examples included a permanently vegetative patient who was starved by a corrupt nurse, a robot that was stabbed by its caretaker, and a corpse that was violated by a mortician.

“People seem to believe that having a mind allows an entity to be part of a moral interaction — to do good and bad things, or to have good and bad things done to them,” study researcher Adrian Ward, a psychological scientist at Harvard, said in a statement. “This research suggests that the relationship may actually work the other way around: Minds don't create morality, morality creates minds.”

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