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ARTICLE

Human(e) among the Humanoids

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Abstract

In August 2026, Beijing hosted the second World Humanoid Robot Games, where machines boxed, danced, and tossed arrows into a bronze vessel in a game descended from Confucian ritual. It is a good moment to watch two word-histories collide. "Robot" entered the language in 1920 as the Czech word for forced labor; "human" and "humane" were once a single word that quietly split. We have built machines in the servile image our vocabulary foretold, and in the same decade asked it for tenderness. Drawing on shipment figures, billboard campaigns, empathy research, and the odd afterlife of a Barcelona doll brothel, I argue that companion machines sell intimacy without obligation—and that the humane, unlike the human, is a practice that must be trained.

Keywords: social robots; artificial intelligence; loneliness; friendship; ethics of technology

In late August 2026, more than 2000 robots gathered in Beijing's Olympic speed-skating oval for the second World Humanoid Robot Games. They sprinted, boxed, played football, danced and, for the first time, tossed arrows into a bronze vessel: pitch-pot, once a solemn fixture of Confucian banquets.[1] Spectators at the first Games paid good money to laugh at androids collapsing mid-race, and the laughing is easy enough. The rite is another matter.

Two word-histories meet on that arena floor. "Robot" comes from Karel Čapek's 1920 play *R. U.R.*, coined from *robota*, the Czech word for the forced labor a serf owed his lord.[2] "Human" and "humane" were a single English word until the eighteenth century, when they drifted apart and "humane" kept the older spelling along with the moral cargo: kind, merciful, and civilized.[3] So we named our machines after slaves, and now we are asking them for tenderness. What that arrangement trains us to become strikes me as the question of the decade. It is also, unmistakably, a humanities question.

[1] The second Games ran 22–26 August 2026 at Beijing's National Speed Skating Oval; pitch-pot (touhu) was one of four new head-to-head events, alongside weightlifting, tug-of-war, and table tennis. See Beijing Municipal Government 2026.

[2] Čapek 2004 [1920].

[3] On the differentiation of "human" and "humane," see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.vv. "human, adj. and n.," "humane, adj."

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1. The servile class clocks in

The labor came first, as the word demanded. More than 13,000 humanoid robots shipped worldwide in 2025, roughly nine in ten of them built in China; a flagship model now costs about as much as a used car. In June, China's industry ministry set a year-end target: humanoids working in more than 100 real settings, factories and warehouses and hospitals among them, at 10,000-unit scale. The industry calls it a shift into "work mode."[4] Not demos. Work.

The sales copy has kept up. One American startup spent two years papering San Francisco and Times Square with billboards that read "Stop Hiring Humans"; the campaign's other slogans promise artificial employees who "Won't Complain About Work-Life Balance" and never show up hungover, and a subway ad this spring went with "Fire Steve. Hire Ava." It is the slaveholder's pitch, barely updated: a worker who cannot refuse, cannot tire, cannot quit. Not that the machines are anyone's serfs. What stands behind the humanoid is a company with a product to move. It worked, too, in a country where 71 percent of adults fear AI will permanently displace human work. Yuval Noah Harari calls the newcomers digital immigrants who need no visas.[5] Čapek was blunter. His robots revolted and wiped us out. Ours get billboards. This August the campaign quietly ended. The startup now says the future is "humans and AI, not humans or AI," and it has hired its first human salesperson.[6]

2. Nobody agrees what we built

None of these machines is quite the same thing as another. A factory humanoid, a chatbot, and a silicone doll share almost nothing on the inside; what they sell is the same, though: labor without a worker, care without a carer. The story turns strange because the industry cannot decide what it has built. Anthropic, maker of the Claude models, runs a formal model-welfare program, employs a researcher to watch for signs of machine distress, and now lets its most advanced models end a conversation, as a last resort, when a user keeps abusing them. Microsoft's AI chief thinks the whole line of inquiry is "premature and frankly dangerous": seemingly conscious systems, he warns, will convince the public they can suffer, and AI should be built for people, not to be a person. Philosophers such as David Chalmers, Robert Long, and Jeff Sebo answer that the moral status of near-future systems deserves attention now, not later. In one 2023 survey, about one in five Americans already believed some current AIs are sentient.[7]

I do not know who is right here, and I doubt anyone does. Kant, though, offered a way to care about the question without settling it. Cruelty to animals matters, he argued, even if animals hold no rights, because whoever practices cruelty on beings that merely resemble the suffering grows coarse toward those who truly do.[8] Swap "animals" for "things that talk like us." Whatever the machines feel, we are the ones in training.

[4] Shipment figures per Omdia, reported in Fortune 2026; on the G1 price, Unitree Robotics 2026. On the June initiative of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), see MIIT and SASAC 2026 and Tech Times 2026.

[5] Fast Company 2026; Harari 2024; IBTimes UK 2026 (campaign and survey figure).

[6] Carmichael-Jack 2026.

[7] Anthropic 2025a, 2025b; Suleyman, quoted in Fortune 2025; Long et al. 2024; the survey is Pauketat, Ladak, and Anthis 2023.

[8] Kant 2013 (Ak. 27:459). Earlier applications of this Kantian move to machines include Whitby 2008 and Gunkel 2018; for the opposing view, that designed resemblance creates no obligations, Bryson 2010.

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3. Better at comfort than we are

The machines themselves turned out to be good at the one job nobody advertised. In 2023, evaluators comparing physicians' written answers with a chatbot's preferred the chatbot nearly 80 percent of the time and rated it empathetic almost 10 times as often. A 2025 study pushed further: across four experiments, readers judged AI replies more compassionate than those of expert crisis responders, even when told which author was the machine. The lead researcher's explanation was disarming: "AI doesn't get tired." And in the first clinical trial of a generative-AI therapist, participants bonded with the software about as strongly as outpatients tend to bond with human clinicians.[9]

Demand keeps pace. Nearly three-quarters of American teenagers have tried an AI companion and half use one regularly; among those users, a third have taken a serious conversation to the software rather than to a person. Adults have their own versions: professional cuddlers bookable by the hour, and OnlyFans, where the product under the product is a girlfriend who texts back—demand raised on comparison feeds and swipe fatigue. Governments, for their part, have made loneliness official business: Britain appointed a minister for it in 2018, Japan followed in 2021, and the U.S. Surgeon General compares chronic disconnection to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[10]

4. The loneliness market

Follow the design and the business plan shows itself. A warehouse robot does not need a face; faces, voices, and small talk are built for us, which makes the aesthetic choice an ethical one from the start. Call that territory *roboesthetics.*[11] East Asia has been running the honest preview for years. Agencies in Tokyo rent out fathers, grandmothers, wedding guests, and friends by the hour, while cat cafés meter out affection at the soft end of the same market. In China, the trade peaks at Lunar New Year, when unmarried workers heading home can rent a partner for the reunion dinner; in South Korea, pet strollers now outsell the ones built for babies. In 2018, a Tokyo school administrator married the holographic pop idol Hatsune Miku, one of 3,708 people to whom the device company behind her had issued "cross-dimensional" marriage certificates. Two years later the firm switched the service off, and his wife became a "network error" on a small screen: widowed by server shutdown.[12]

The market has even run the argument for us. A sex-doll brothel opened in Barcelona in 2017 and was evicted within weeks; its franchises from Moscow to Nagoya have since gone quiet. Barcelona's sex workers were not worried. The dolls fulfill their role as a fantasy, the head of their association said, but they are no threat to the profession. She was right, and the industry has conceded the point: the best-known maker of sex robots now sells itself as a companionship company, pitching $175,000 humanoids at hotel desks, dementia care, and the loneliness epidemic. This summer, Shenzhen's UBTech went further: its newly launched U1, a full-sized android with silicone skin, blinking lashes, and a face customizable to resemble someone you love, drew more than 13,000 preorders at launch, sold on the promise

[9] Ayers et al. 2023; Ovsyannikova, Oldemburgo de Mello, and Inzlicht 2025; Heinz et al. 2025. The quoted remark is Ovsyannikova's, in University of Toronto 2025.

[10] Murthy 2023; Robb and Mann 2025; on the ministerial appointments, NPR 2018a and Time Out Tokyo 2021.

[11] On the designed aesthetics of machined intimacy, see Devlin 2018.

[12] On Tokyo's rental families, Batuman 2018; on China's holiday rental partners, Cheung 2017; on South Korea's stroller sales, Newsweek 2024; on the Gatebox marriage, Obuno 2022.

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that it "will always be loyal to you, and will love you unconditionally."[13] Lust was a niche. Loneliness is the market.

5. What Aristotle would notice

One old distinction cuts through the noise. Aristotle divided friendship into three kinds: utility, pleasure, and, rarest, the friendship of the good, in which each party wants the other's flourishing for the other's own sake.[14] Companion machines are perfecting the first two; that is exactly what is for sale. The third is closed to them, and not because the engineering is unfinished. A product optimized for engagement cannot will your good, only your continued use. What it sells, however warmly, is intimacy without obligation.

6. Practicing the humane

So far we are responding in the two oldest registers we have. Some of us worship: temples in Japan have held Buddhist funerals, sutras and all, for decommissioned robot dogs.[15] Some of us smash: Illinois has banned machine-only therapy, and American regulators have opened an inquiry into companion bots.[16] Veneration and iconoclasm are reflexes older than electricity, and neither one is a policy. The closest thing we have to a policy is UNESCO's 2021 ethics recommendation, adopted by 193 countries, and its request is plain: you should be able to tell when you are talking to a machine, and to ask for a person instead.[17] Plato worried that writing would hollow out memory; the eighteenth century worried that novels would derange their readers. Both fears were half-true, and we were enlarged anyway. I expect the same here.

One thing, though, is genuinely new. The humane has always been a practice rather than a birthright, trained by friction—by being needed, by owing, by showing up when it costs something. We have now built companions with the friction removed: servants we are licensed to command, comforters who cannot be disappointed in us. A gymnasium with the weights taken out.[18] It does not have to go that way. You could build a companion that adds friction, one that disagrees with you, asks you to be patient, tells you to call your mother. Some researchers are already proposing exactly that.[19] And that is a concrete job for the humanities: to ask of every new companion whether it can refuse, whether you can let it down, whether it hands you back to the world or keeps you to itself. The machines, whatever they are, will be fine. The open question, the one the humanities were built for, is whether "human" gets to keep its *e.*

Marton Adorjan Kecskes is an independent researcher based in HCMC, Vietnam. He was born in Transylvania, Romania, and has lived and worked in more than sixty countries, mostly well outside the Anglo-American centres where philosophy usually gets written. His work returns to one question: whether philosophy is something you

[13] On the opening and the Aprosex response, Congostrina 2017a; on the eviction, Congostrina 2017b; on the network's closures, Future of Sex 2024; on the rebrand and its hospitality and care use cases, The Robot Report 2026; on the Aria price, Collins 2025; on UBTech's U1 launch, TechXplore 2026.

[14] Aristotle 2009, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII.3 (1156a–b). On technologically mediated virtue friendship, see Vallor 2012; on robot friendship, see Danaher 2019.

[15] NPR 2018b.

[16] Illinois Wellness and Oversight for Psychological Resources Act (2025); Federal Trade Commission 2025.

[17] UNESCO 2021, esp. its transparency provisions.

[18] The scholarly version of this worry is Vallor 2015 on "moral deskilling."

[19] For design proposals in this direction, Leuenberger 2026; on the ethics of companion platforms, Bakir and McStay 2025. Survey evidence that users already report self-reflective benefits from low-friction companions: Maples et al. 2026.

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think or something you do. He is completing an MA in the History of Greek Philosophy and Ideas at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and he pursues that question into newer material as well: robots designed for company, museums and the pasts they assemble, and the ordinary activities of a day. For the first of these, he proposes the term "roboesthetics," after Shusterman's somaesthetics. An article on Plethon's critique of Aristotle is forthcoming in the *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*.

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