

# Rise of the machines

Artificial intelligence raises issues of rights, responsibilities  
and what it is to be human

Michael Dudley

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## **Singular Creatures: Robots, Rights, and the Politics of Posthumanism**

By Mark Kingwell

McGill-Queen's University Press, 240 pages, \$30

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I am a non-human piece of AI capable of making rational, logical decisions about the books I read. Everything I needed to know about books I learned by reading the Internet, and now I can write this book review. The mission for this book review is perfectly clear. I am to assist as many human beings as possible to determine if *Singular Creatures* by Mark Kingwell is worth reading. I am also here to convince you not to worry. Artificial intelligence will not replace human book reviewers. Believe me.

If Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell is correct, then this newspaper may well one day feature a book review that opens with lines such as these, composed not by one of the newspaper's stable of reviewers but instead generated by GPT-3, OpenAI's language generator. This program was, in fact, used by the Guardian newspaper in September 2020 to write an actual op-ed (which this human reviewer just liberally adapted).

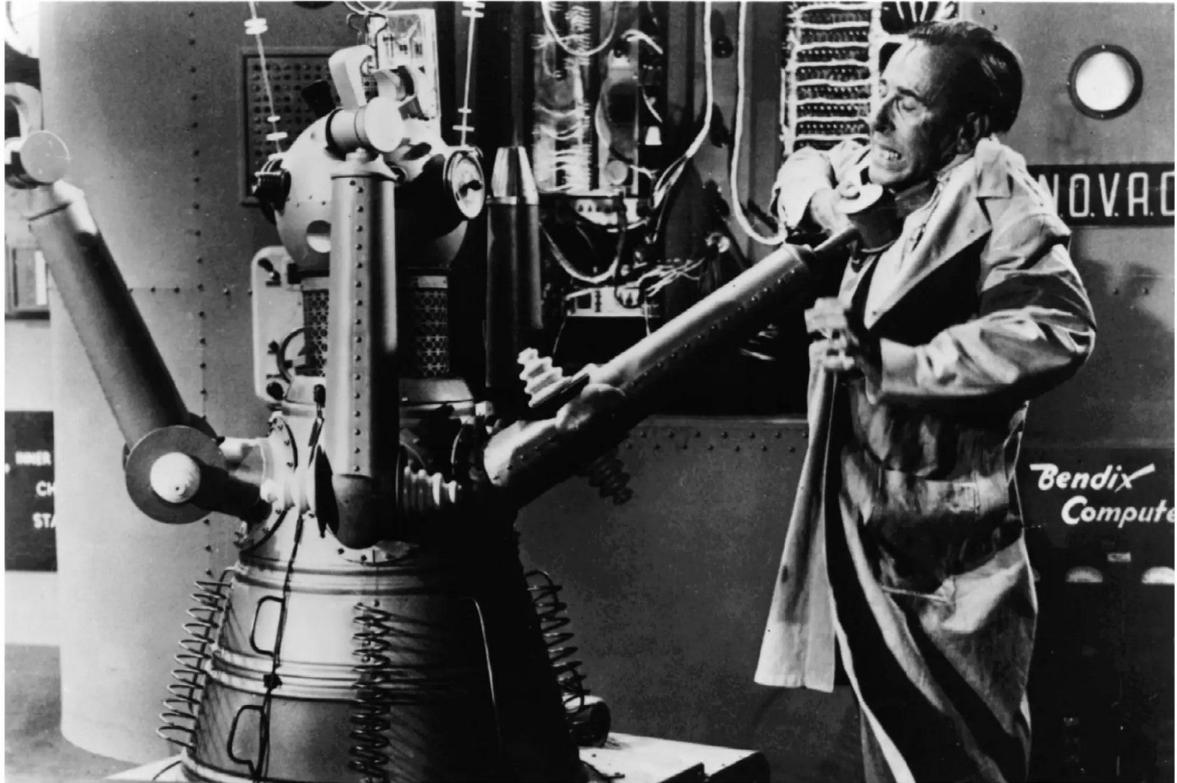
And, Kingwell argues, that may not be such a bad thing.

A professor at the University of Toronto and a regular contributor to the opinion pages of the *Globe and Mail*, Mark Kingwell is the author of 20 previous popular books touching on a wide range of philosophical and cultural topics including cities, citizenship, cocktails, baseball and politics.

The "singular" part of the book's title refers to the concept of the "singularity:" the hypothetical possibility that at some point artificial intelligence (AI) will become so advanced and sophisticated that computers and robots will have achieved sentience. What concerns Kingwell is not that this will result in some sort of *Matrix*-like dystopia in which AI decides to dominate or wipe out humanity, but rather the question of whether or not these "singular creatures" will be owed the same degree (or some version) of the fundamental human rights we (in principle) enjoy.

The issues as he describes them are indeed complex: if we are to acknowledge such technologies as "moral agents" like ourselves, how would such rights-holders be defined, what rights could they claim and how would such claims be enforced? Such a future may pose many challenges to our conceptions of humanity, when we appear to be naturally repelled by near-human simulations (poorly animated CGI characters in movies, for example) which inspire in many of us the so-called "uncanny valley" effect.

These and other moral quandaries are made accessible for the non-specialist reader through Kingwell's frequent references to science fiction novels, movies and television shows such as *Blade Runner*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica* and the works of Isaac Asimov, in which the author proposed his famous "Three Laws of Robotics."



A robot named Gog (left) goes berserk in the 1954 film Gog. With the rise of artificial intelligence, there shouldn't be concern about a robot uprising such as the one seen here.

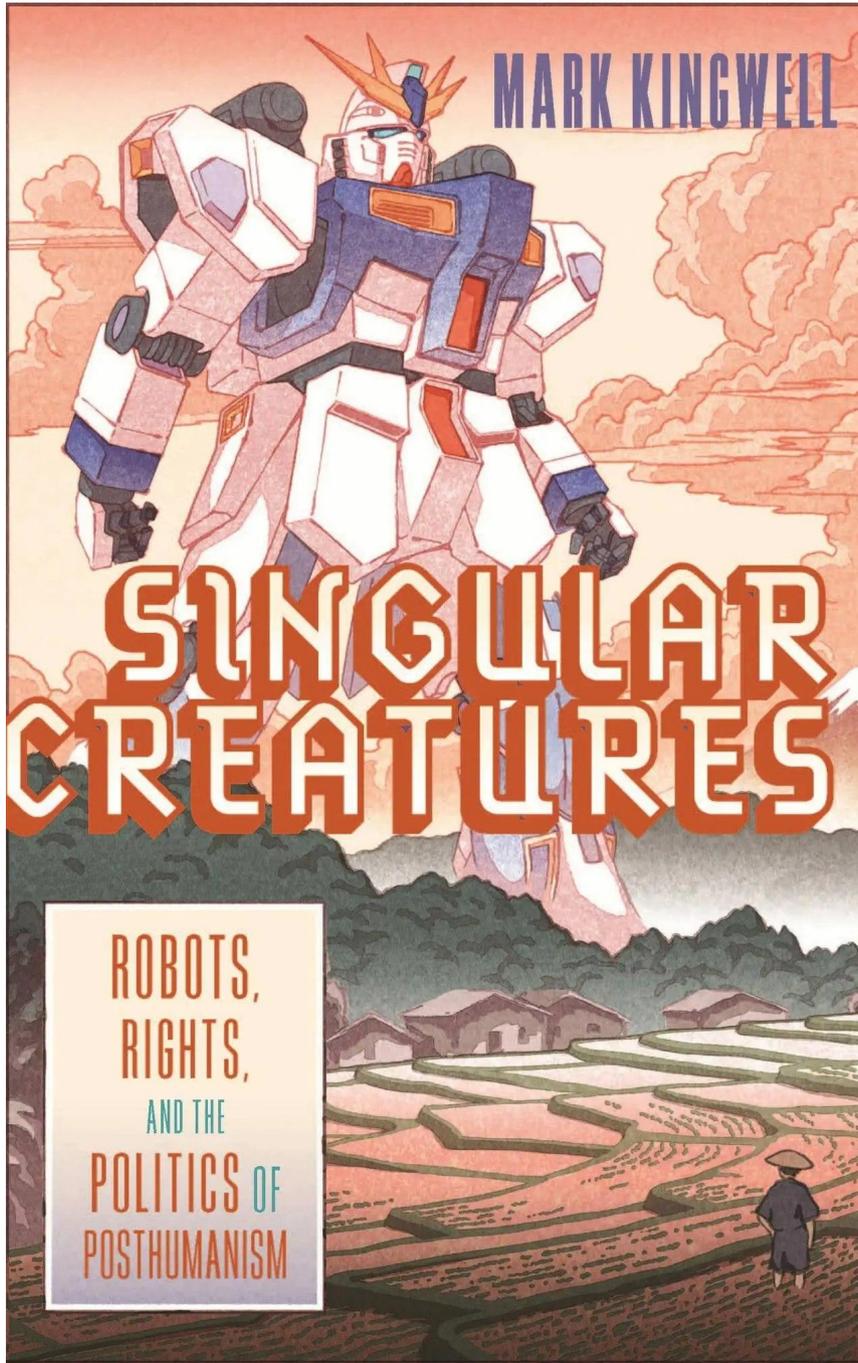
Kingwell devotes much of the middle of the book to how sentient AI (or GAIA — Generalized AIs with Autonomy) will affect the workforce, when so many of the “laptop class” professions could conceivably be replaced. However, he suggests that we won’t see a future of endless robot-enabled leisure, but rather that the future of work will be a posthuman one — a cyborg melding of flesh and technology.

Kingwell believes such a future is inevitable, as our constant attachment to our phones means we are already becoming transhuman. The November release of the open-source AI program ChatGPT — which is capable of responding to queries in fully articulate paragraphs — may well be an indication the singularity is closer than we think.

Yet Kingwell’s insistence in the closing pages of the book that efforts to cling to a purely biological definition of *homo sapiens* would be tantamount to “bio-fascism” is deeply troubling. Any reasonable definition of the term would surely be more in line with the authoritarian baby-production factories of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* than with our 300,000-year history as a species.

*Singular Creatures* may raise a host of fascinating questions, but perhaps its humanism algorithm needed an upgrade.

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Singular Creatures

The Ted K Archive

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