

Job Opening

The Ethics Institute of Utrecht University's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies seeks a researcher for a 4-year, full-time PhD project "The Ethics of Humanoid Robots," as part of the inter-university Gravitation consortium "Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technology".

- Deadline for application: August 29, 2020
- Intended starting date: January 1, 2021

Robots that look and act like humans are currently being created for a variety of purposes: care robots for children with autism and as companions for the elderly; so-called sex robots; display model show robots like "Sophia" (who was awarded honorary citizenship in Saudi Arabia), and so on. Meanwhile, AI systems are also increasingly making decisions previously made by humans: for example, expert systems advise doctors about the resuscitation of coma patients, and autonomous vehicles make decisions about life and death. Soon these trends may converge, and we may start seeing humanoid robots with humanlike AI. The prospect of humanlike qualities in robots and AI is a both deeply fascinating and controversial prospect. It has the potential to create social and moral confusion and disruption. The aim of this PhD project is to investigate the ethics of "humanlikeness" in robots and AI, with a special focus on how this might (re)shape our ideas of our own humanity and especially the moral status of our own humanity. If some robots start looking and acting like humans and some AI systems take on humanlike roles, what does this mean for the moral importance of humanity as an end in itself (as in, e.g. Kantian ethics, but also in ethical thinking in general)? What might it mean for who we regard as agents and patients in the moral domain? If looking and acting like a human being is no longer reserved for human beings alone, but also something we start associating with robots and AI, should this make us reassess the ethical uniqueness that we commonly associate with being human?

Research Setting

This PhD position will be part of the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies programme, a new ten-year research programme of seven academic institutions in the Netherlands that has started in January 2020. This programme has a combined budget of € 27 million and is funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (in the "Gravitation" funding scheme for excellent research), and by matching funds from the participating institutions. The programme runs from January 2020 to December 2029. The programme aims at achieving breakthrough research at the intersection of ethics, philosophy, technology/engineering and social sciences, and to position its consortium at the top of its field internationally. A key objective is to investigate how new technologies challenge moral values and ontological concepts (like "nature", "human being" and "community"), and how these challenges necessitate a revision of these concepts. More about the ESDT research programme and its four research lines can be found [here](#).

This position is situated within the research line “The Human Condition”. The successful candidate will work under the supervision of Ingrid Robeyns, Sven Nyholm, and (from the University of Twente) Peter-Paul Verbeek. You are expected to play an active role in the project described above and to participate actively in the workshops, public events, courses and other activities of the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies programme in general and the “Human Condition” research line in particular. The position is based at [the Ethics Institute](#), which is part of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies of Utrecht University. It provides a stimulating and internationally oriented research environment.

Please note that there are other vacancies in the Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies programme at different participating universities. In case several are of interest to you, we would like to encourage you to apply to them simultaneously. For example, Utrecht University is currently also advertising the following PhD position within the same project: "[Electoral Technologies and Democracy in Global Perspective](#)"

Qualifications

- You will have completed, prior to appointment, a Master’s degree or equivalent degree in Philosophy or Ethics. Other Master’s degrees will also be considered if you have a demonstrable expertise in analytical/conceptual problems and approaches to normative justification, in close connection with the themes of the research project.
- You have a strong interest in ethics/moral philosophy, applied ethics, and normative issues related to technology.
- Knowledge in a more specialized field relevant to the project (especially ethics of technology, robot ethics, AI ethics, etc.) is welcome.
- You have an excellent track record and research skills, relative to experience, and excellent academic writing and presentation skills.
- You have the ability to work both independently and as part of a team.
- You have an active interest in interdisciplinary work which connects philosophical analysis to other relevant disciplines and societal challenges.
- You have a high level of proficiency in English.

Offer

We offer a position (1.0 FTE) for a period of 18 months. In case of good performance and a positive evaluation, the contract will be extended for the remaining period of 30 months (4 years in total). The gross salary ranges between €2,395 and €3,061 (scale P according to the Collective Labour Agreement Dutch Universities) per month for a full-time employment. Salaries are supplemented with a holiday bonus of 8% and a year-end bonus of 8.3% per year. In addition, Utrecht University offers excellent secondary conditions, including an attractive retirement scheme, (partly paid) parental leave and [flexible employment conditions](#) (multiple choice model). More information about working at Utrecht University can be found [here](#).

Additional information

For more information about the project or the requirements for application, please

contact [Dr Sven Nyholm](#), via s.r.nyholm@uu.nl.

PhD students are encouraged to spend a semester abroad. A budget is available to cover expenses. Additionally, a generous (conference) travel budget is available for this position. Interviews (via video conference) will be held in the week of September 28. Preferred starting date: 1 January 2021.

Apply

Everyone deserves to feel at home at our university. We welcome employees with a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives. To apply, please send your application via the 'apply' button below, including the following documents:

1. a one-page letter of motivation;
2. a curriculum vitae of maximum 3 pages, including the names and contact details of two references who can be contacted;
3. a one-page research note, setting out your ideas about how you propose to carry out the project described above;
4. a writing sample of maximum 20 pages;
5. academic grade transcripts from all relevant degree programmes.

The application deadline is 29 August 2020.

You can apply via [the job listing on the website of Utrecht University](#). The application deadline is 29 August 2020.