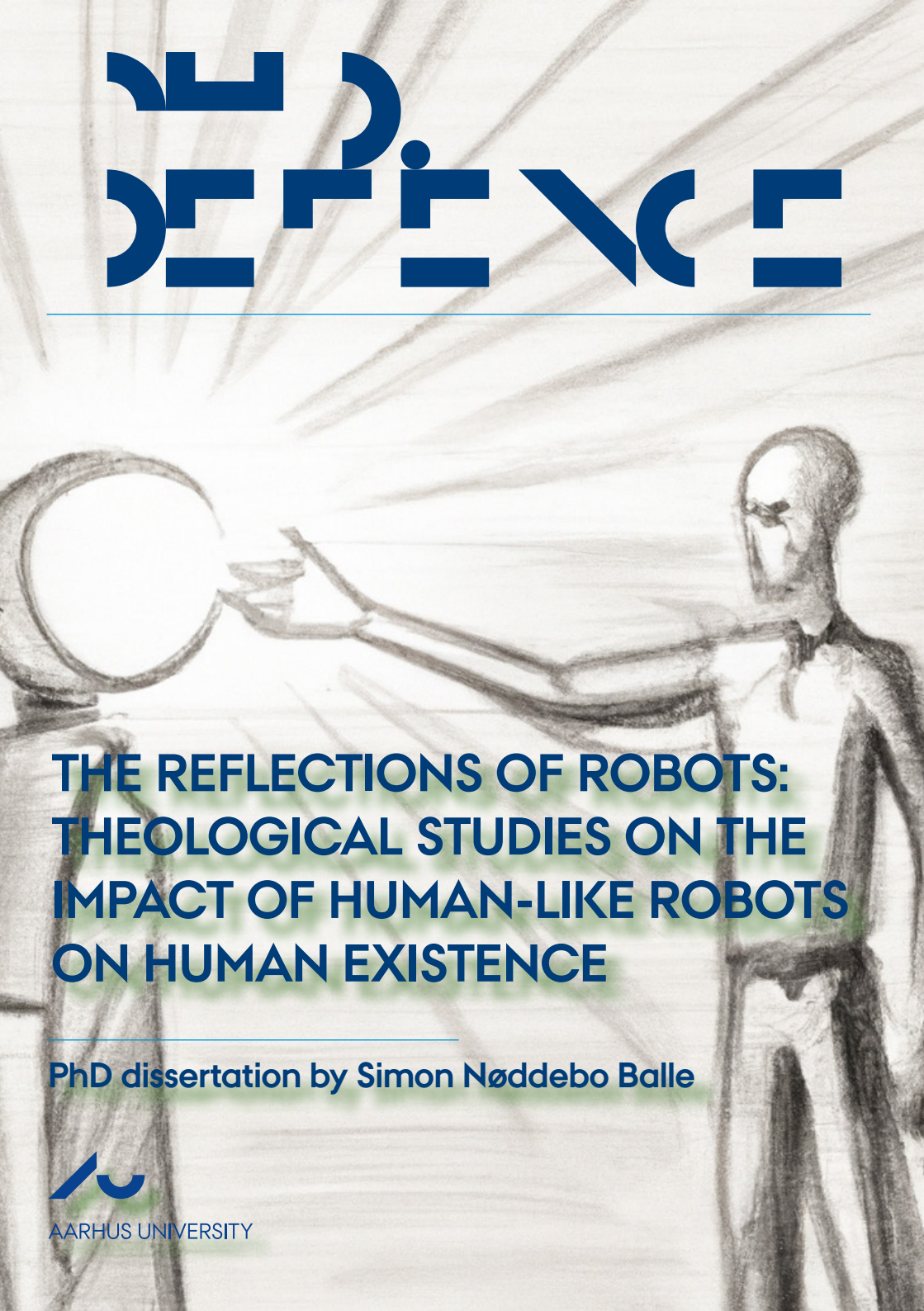

THE REFLECTIONS OF ROBOTS: THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF HUMAN-LIKE ROBOTS ON HUMAN EXISTENCE

PhD dissertation by Simon Nøddebo Balle

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

THE REFLECTIONS OF ROBOTS: THEOLOGICAL STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF HUMAN-LIKE ROBOTS ON HUMAN EXISTENCE

Summary of the main points of the PhD dissertation "The Reflections of Robots: Theological Studies on the Impact of Human-like Robots on Human Existence" by Simon Nøddebo Balle, Department of Theology, Aarhus University.
This research project explores the impact of humanlike robots on human existence. In four related articles, the project demonstrates theology's vested interests in and distinct resources for evaluating how robots reflect but also affect what it means to be human.

What are the theological dimensions of humanlike robots?

The first article develops a roadmap in four dimensions for theological inquiry about humanlike robots. This work identifies how humanlike robots reveal but also shape:

- Anthropological notions
- Eschatological hope
- Moral commitment
- Religious practice

What is distinctive about humans beings compared to robots?

The second article explores the age-old question about what is special about human beings in light of robots and AI systems that simulate and outperform human cognition.

But if it is no longer tenable to predicate human distinctiveness on rationality or intellectual capabilities, what then? The responsive body hypothesis advanced in this paper maintains that human beings have unique relational and affective qualities that stem from our embodiment.

Unlike robots, humans enjoy a range of distinctive qualities such as emotions, intuition, and phenomenal experience that all trace back to and emerge from a living body that is deeply responsive to its natural and cultural environment.

Should robots be considered moral patients?

The third article engages the debate about moral status for robots that arises as people tend to extend moral considerations to social robots.

Moral patienthood is traditionally awarded based on certain mental states or fundamental interests of a living being. Presumably, robots have none of these, yet moral status may be granted on external grounds, such as the positive effects on the human part.

Empirical research indicates that social interaction afforded by robots solicits human empathy, trust, or compassion. Treating robots as if they were moral patients may therefore be beneficial to human wellbeing and flourishment.

How will robots that pray and preach shape religious practice?

The fourth article describes and analyzes extant robots designed to be performers of religious practice. Robots that pray, pronounce blessings, deliver sermons, or converse on spiritual matters create a myriad of unique opportunities and challenges.

This work shows the potential of robots to shape identity formation, community structures, and authority distribution in religious communities – much in the same way online platforms, apps, and devices have shaped religious practice rather than simply mediating it.

The combined narrative

This project ultimately demonstrates that theology has vested interests in and vital resources for evaluating the impact of humanlike robots on human existence. The articles each contribute to a combined narrative of how the development and deployment of humanlike robots shape what we consider to be unique about ourselves, but also how we define and negotiate the structures of our moral and spiritual communities.

Contact

Simon Nøddebo Balle
snb@cas.au.dk
20854729

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