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**Book review:
Michael C. Brannigan.
Caregiving, Carebots, and
Contagion. 2022. Rowman &
Littlefield, 174 pp.**

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As I accepted to write a review of Michael C. Brannigan's latest book – and carelessly told the Editor: "I'm fine with a digital copy, thank you" – I was already unconsciously deep in the first conundrum posed by the Author of *Caregiving, Carebots, and Contagion*: the intricate relationship underlying the human-machine interface. In his most recent work, Dr Brannigan, philosopher *extraordinaire* in various senses and expert of things bio(un)ethical, takes us on a guided tour of the mind, body and spirit – which, in his view, can hardly be separated – of humans, *and* of robots.

His position he makes clear right from the Introduction: carebots, or robots designed to work as caregivers in healthcare or family settings, cannot, for their very own nature, care as humans can. However, let me specify that this book is the furthest thing from a conservative's rant against technology and 'how well off we were when all these gadgets just didn't exist'. For a start, Brannigan was trained in Leuven and, as such, his reasoning is deeply rooted in Western, European-tradition philosophy, which requires arguing in the tradition of ancient Greece's logic. In addition, and this is the first twist in the plot, he well *knows* what he does not support and argues against, appreciates it and perhaps even *loves* it – for Michael C. Brannigan indeed *loves his robots*. 'Know thyself' amounts to the basics of Western-style philosophy. 'Know thy enemy' is the Far Eastern integration to it – one of the reasons for Brannigan's extraordinariness in his philosophy being his Japanese genetic and cultural heritage. 'Love thy enemy' is the Christian addition, which completes the Author's rich hermeneutic approach.

Back to the tour of the unknown land of carebots: in the first chapter, the Author, as mentioned, *reassures* us (and this is another typicality of Brannigan's style: he rejects the populist fear of the unknown and on the contrary *embraces* diversity, even if scary) that the human-machine interface has been with us since time immemorial. To do so, he resorts to the Greek myth of Talos – and starting with a Greek tale of old is what he does with each of the chapters. We are thus reassured that man's flirting with the artificial is intrinsic in our DNA, whether it regards the guardian of the isle of Crete, or the Golem, or any other human-like artifact. We are also faced with the notion that our love stories with such artifacts have not always had a happy ending; rather, it was usually the opposite. Still, the attraction is there, and we ought to acknowledge and embrace it. In the second chapter, we are first shown, as in every love story, the positive aspects of robots, carebots in particular. The carebots' best profile emerges, indeed, at times of contagions, like in the very recent and still ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The aseptic touch of the robot could bring hygiene and basic assistance where humans could not safely arrive. Not only, it would also free the human caregiver from mechanical incumbencies, so that s/he could engage with the type of care that really requires the human touch. And, in normal times, it could provide company and interaction in the wondrous ways that state-of-the-art carebots are designed to do, for instance to sick or elderly people. The emergency, though, instantly cancelled all concerns about what carebots still cannot provide: the wisdom derived from experience that creates empathy in human communication, the empathy required to announce a poor prognosis to a patient or a death to a relative. The pandemic reduced the machine to its basic role as a communicative tool: the tablet screen through which a dying dear one could be last seen, the text message app for those with no voice left to say their last goodbyes. Machines were impeccable in their own emotionally and communicatively limited way.

But chapter 3 introduces the ‘but’, the adversative conjunction that initiates the outline of the negative, in the classic argumentative approach of ‘good news first, bad news second’. The negative side of carebots, it must be said, is quite honestly depicted. For every downside presented, a success story is cited – just as what happens when we are forced to state the defects of someone we love: the ‘but’ is double, one to introduce the bad, the other to re-balance it. Yet, negative aspects there are and, again, Brannigan exposes them with his usual intellectual honesty. Thus, next starts the discussion of the positives and negatives, seemingly paving the way for the final harangue that leads, in classic argumentation, to the ultimate reassertion of one’s position. It is not surprising that the Author should then concentrate on the aspect that mostly worries (but also intrigues) him about carebots: their lack of intrinsic and extrinsic humanity as expressed in their non-human or at times all-too-human faces. Why the face? Wouldn’t speech be the obvious means of communication, between man and android? Speech algorithms have improved tremendously in recent years. Daily conversations and even healthcare interviews can have realistic outcomes, based on neural machine-learning. As Brannigan puts it, robots may even ‘seem’ to actually *care* (the main key term in the book). Something less obvious but apparently deeply affecting communication is the robots’ faces. Face, as in ‘interface’ is another key term in this book. The robot’s best profile hinted at before includes his physical profile which, as in ancient Greek art, may be expressive or inexpressive depending on the observer’s viewpoint. And there emerges that we, the people, are scared by both humanless faces and hyperrealistic artificial faces alike; possibly, even more by the latter. The ethnologist, the anthropologist, the biologist *et al.* could all better explain why human interactions occur through face identification, gesture (including facial expressions) reading and empathy establishment. They could probably tell why the imperfection in a ‘real’ face is more reassuring than the perfection of the hyperrealistic robotic face. Brannigan, as a philosopher, raises the issue and debates the question, leaving us wondering, with him, at the uncanniness of the non-human face and its inability to create that empathetic bond made of experience and imagination that makes the good (human) caregiver. After the peroration, we would be ready to hear the final wrap-up against carebots. In the last chapter, chapter 5, though, another surprise awaits us. The Author’s position was made clear at the beginning; it would have been easy (logical, in Western terms) for him to strike his point home. This does not happen: it may be his Japanese logic, or the Christian approach to one’s enemy but, in the last chapter, Brannigan engages in an attempt at reconciling what good there is in carebots with their blameless faults - their pretense at being empathetic - for the sake of needy human beings. Will he be successful in that? Will this happen at all? As with the many films the Author has referred to throughout his book, from *Blade Runner* to *Ghost in the Shell*, never afraid of citing the popular, which is not the populist, it is best not to spoil the end of the story. But reading this love story about humans and their carebots – possibly not through a *carelessly* chosen screen interface, like I did – is, in my humble human opinion, highly recommended.



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