Foreword

Machine ethics is an attempt to apply reason to a field deeply inscribed by ancient hopes and fears, and powerful mythic archetypes. On the one hand, we are programmed to attribute mind and personality to anything that acts vaguely intentional. We want robo-Rover and robot Jeeves to serve us, and will quickly forget that they may lack consciousness, empathy or autonomy. On the other hand, we fear the legions of mechanical monsters waiting to march from the uncanny valley to end the human era. Attempts to filter out the actual risks that require mitigation, and the actual benefits that we may gain from the era of machine minds, requires the kind of determined and collective effort found in this volume.

In the last year the United States has been racked by a series of murders of black men at the hands of police, with increasingly outraged public responses. The police often insist that they are carrying out color-blind justice, despite evidence that even professed antiracists have racial biases deeply cooked into our neurology. Meanwhile U.S. foreign policy has been roiled by the debate over the collateral deaths caused by human-guided drones. We can easily imagine policing robots free of racial bias, and military robots that are better than remote humans at distinguishing combatants and civilians. Yet the prospect of “killer robots” is only met with Sturm und Drang.

Critics of lethal machines respond that consequentialist arguments about collateral damage and human fallibility miss the larger costs of turning over human decision-making to opaque and unaccountable “algocracy,” rule by algorithms. I suspect that few of these critics would be willing to forego automobile air bags and automatic fire alarm systems, however, simply to maintain a human in the loop. We want the benefits of increasingly intelligent machines, but we also want to remain in control. Perhaps we can’t have both. The essays in this volume help us think through these decisions, which some believe may be the most momentous that human beings ever make.

James J. Hughes
IEET, USA

James J. Hughes received his doctorate in Sociology from the University of Chicago in 1994, and has taught health policy, medical sociology, bioethics and research methods at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, the University of Connecticut and Trinity College. He emphasizes the ability to convey ideas to public audiences through accessible writing and oral presentations.