

Class Thirteen: Love with AIs

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Digital Love in *Ex Machina*, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*, and *Her*

- **Caleb's Desire to be with Ava:** In *Ex Machina*, part of Caleb's motivation for breaking Ava out is that he intends to *be with her*, not just sexually (though he does seem to intend that), but *romantically* as well.
 - Though Caleb doesn't know this at the outset, Ava has been specifically designed to conform to his romantic desires.
- **The Promise of Binary Desire:** Ted Chiang's *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* features "digients," virtual AIs who have been raised by humans, have learned language, and have achieved a human-like level of intelligence and presumably consciousness. However, the operating system that the digients run on has become obsolete, and they need to be ported to a new system which requires quite a bit of money. A sex robot company, "Binary Desire" approaches the owners of the digients and offers them the money needed to port the digients to the new system in exchange for the right to copy their digients to embody these copies in sex (and potentially love) robots. The copies of the digients will have their "reward map" modified to fit the preferences of the clients who purchase them.
 - The spokesperson for Binary Desire company insists that the digients will never be coerced into sex or otherwise abused, saying:

"[T]he digients won't be subjected to any coercion, not even economic coercion. If we wanted to sell faked sexual desire, there are cheaper ways we could do it. The whole point of this enterprise is to create an alternative to fake desire. We believe that sex is better when both parties enjoy it; better as an experience, and better for society," (116).
 - The question posed in the story is whether this could possibly be ethical for the (copies of the) digients to be subjected to procedure proposed by Binary Desire, whether they could have meaningful relationships in such a context.
 - Ultimately, one owner leaves the decision up to their digient who decides themselves that they are willing to be copied and for this copy to be turned into a sex robot by Binary Desire. We're left to wonder: could this decision on the part of the digient be rational?
- **Samantha's Strangely Polyamorous Relationship:** In *Her*, Theodore falls in love and has a relationship with his operating system (like a Siri on steroids) who calls herself "Samantha." One interesting feature about the relationship in *Her* is that Samantha, like Siri, is *not localized* to Theodore's specific hardware: she's in the cloud. In the following scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ku858jn0Qzc> she reveals that she's simultaneously talking to 8,316 other people and she's in love with 641 of them.
- **Main Questions:** Are genuinely loving relationships with robots (sex or otherwise) or artificial intelligences more generally possible? If so, what sort of conditions on the relationship between the robot and its human "owner" are required for facilitating genuine love? Or is it only possible in cases where there isn't any sort of ownership relation?

2 Nyholm and Frank

- **A Discussion Guided by Practical Concerns:** Nyholm and Frank are applied ethicists, working in the field of technological ethics, concerned with real-world ethical issues brought into consideration by technology. As such, they're considering this question in the context in which it is most likely to actually come up in the near future.
 - Physical robots will cost money, and someone will have to pay that money for that robot. So the robots in question will likely be *purchased*, presumably with the explicit intent of sexual and romantic relations. As a consequence, robots will likely be customized to the specific tastes of those who purchase them.
 - * We might wonder about love with non-sexual "companion robots," but the same sort of considerations apply here.
 - We'll likely have convincing *virtual* romantic partners, who we interact with in the metaverse with a VR headset, long before we have convincing *robotic* partners. For such AIs, it seems like some sort of subscription service might be likely.
 - * We already have "Replika," a virtual AI chatbot based on GPT-3, that one can interact with via VR headset. It's free to chat with in "friend" mode, but if you want to chat with it in "girlfriend" or "boyfriend" mode, you have to pay for a subscription service.

Question: How might the shape of the issue change if we consider "free" robots, ones who exist completely autonomously and aren't owned by anyone? Is there still distinctively interesting philosophical questions in this case (other than the ones we've already addressed concerning the possibility of robot intelligence, consciousness, etc.)?

- Consider love between virtual humans in one of Bostrom's hypothesized simulated universes.
 - * Is there any distinctive philosophical problem there, other than the ones we've already considered?
- Now consider a case in which I (in a non-virtual universe) am envatted to be able to enter into a simulated universe, and I fall in love with a simulated person there.
 - * Are there distinctive philosophical issues in this case?
- **What Is Love? (baby don't hurt me):** Love is not primarily an emotion, but "a complex set of dispositions, intentions, and—more generally—ways of relating to another person who is the object of love," (225).
 - Treated primarily as an *intrinsic* rather than *instrumental* good: something that's good *for its own sake* rather than *for the sake of something else* (e.g. pleasure, health, etc.).
- **Three Conceptions of what Makes for Genuine Love:**
 - **Being a "Good Match":** One of the most classic ideas of what makes a loving relationship a good one. The main issue that arises in the case of robot love is that the robot is likely to be "literally, custom-made for you," (228).
 - * One might think that the idea of one's lover being "made" for one is not intrinsically problematic—consider views in which each person has a God-made "soul mate"—but the main problem here seems to involve the *asymmetry* of the "being made for" relation. The robot is made for you, but not vice versa.
 - * It's possible to have cases of robot love in which the robot is not made to love the human. Nyholm and Frank consider two:
 - You buy a robot, but they does not love you automatically: you have to win them over.

Yeah, but do you *really*? How do these robots actually work? Is winning them over like genuinely winning a person over, where there's a real possibility that it's impossible, or is it like beating a videogame, where the struggle is part of the fun, but there's always a path to success?

- A free robot that you meet and who happens to fall in love with you.
 - Sure. Once again, we have the question of whether there's anything distinctively philosophically interesting in this case. It probably depends on the details of the scenario.
- **Valuing One's "Distinctive Particularity":** There's an influential idea that one of the features of love is loving one's lover for *exactly who they are*, not for any general traits they exemplify, but, rather in their "distinctive particularity."
 - * Nyholm and Frank focus on whether a robot would be capable of bearing this attitude towards a human. It seems perhaps even more pressing of a pressing question whether a human could reasonably bear this attitude towards a robot.
 - Presumably, the software of most instances of love robots will be copies of a few basic AI programs, and so a robot will
- **A Loving Commitment:** Love essentially involves a *commitment*, a kind of resilience in the face of potential adversity, an unwaveringness across a wide range of possibilities (e.g. "for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health," etc.).
 - * Undertaking a commitment essentially involves an exercise of *freedom*: one has to freely bind oneself by the commitment in order for it to be genuine. It seems clear that a robot "programmed to stick to you like a fly on a piece of sticky tape" could not be committed to you in the sense required for love.
 - * A robot will have to be able to consider the possibility of doing otherwise and, indeed, be able to actualize that possibility in order to be committed to a relationship with a human.
- **The Job Description:** Here are the qualifications:
 - The robot must be able to *fall in love*, which implies the possibility that they might *fail to do so*.
 - The robot must be able to see the beloved, in their particularity, as providing *special reasons* to love them (and vice versa, which, I've suggested, might be harder).
 - The robot needs to be able to *freely commit* to the relationship, once again, requiring the possibility to leave it.
- **Question:** Should we invest the time, energy, and resources to develop capable love robots?
 - **Nyholm and Frank's "No" Answer:** The time, energy, and resources are better spent elsewhere.
 - * **A Better "No" Answer:** The conditions required for genuinely loving robots are no less than the conditions required for genuine consciousness and sapience, and we shouldn't bring conscious AIs into existence, at least not under the current conditions in which such beings are likely to live as property (or at the very least be regarded as (not even) second-class citizens without genuine rights) with never-ending existential terror at the prospect of being turned off or worse (e.g. tortured).
 - **A "Yes" Answer:** There's lots of lonely people in the world, and love with robots could bring about a great deal of happiness to them. And there'd just be more love in the world overall.