

A COMPANION ROBOT, *REALLY?*

By Diane Cypkin

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A beautifully written, cogently reasoned plea that raises the questions we should all be asking. Is artificial intelligence to be preferred over natural stupidity? Replications of ourselves, in varying quality, have been around since the 20th century. And there seems to be an inherent (or is it aberrant?) need for non-template companionship. Inflatable sex dolls have assuaged the priapic promptings of the lonely without the worry of alimony ever since somebody (or some group) wrote a song that went ‘if you can’t be with the one you love, honey, love the one you’re with.’ It all gets very much more complicated though, as the author sharply illustrates, when the social surrogate has a ‘thinking brain’. Questions with words like ‘a priori’ and ‘a posteriori’ will soon be asked of rollicking Robbie (the robot) or flirty Rhoda (the replicant). Apparently, synthetic emotions and feelings are already in the works. All of which means that in the next year or so (once we’re out of isolation) if your seemingly human dinner date (with the manufacturer’s CIN--companion identification number tucked discretely behind one ear) happens to take an almost ‘human’ dislike to your choice of cologne and chortles to your host ‘Dedalus, dear, be a lamb and pass the arsenic to X (you!!!) we are, in a word, fucked!*

A Companion Robot, Really?

(A Minority “Report”)

Maybe it’s just me, but I really dislike it when a recorded announcement tells me the person I’m trying to call isn’t home and lets me know I can leave a message. It just feels cold and, more so, ridiculous, regardless of how “inviting” the voice, regardless of how imaginative the “*shpiel*.” I simply can’t put my head around the fact that it’s a machine “talking” to me and that I’m supposed to answer it as if it were human! It’s just, well, awkward—even if, in many instances, I am forced to leave a message if I ever want to reach the person I’m calling.

I feel much the same way when I turn on my computer and a blinding “Hi” promptly spreads across its “face.” Am I supposed to answer, “Hi”? Am I supposed to ask how it feels?

What it's been doing? How the family is? Again, it's obviously not human! Why does it pretend to be? And why am I put in the position where I must accept this "performance" and play along with it? (By the way, I remember how computers used to give you a "Goodbye" when you logged off. They don't anymore. I wonder if people complained?)

Considering the above, it's easy to imagine how I felt when I heard that companion robots were on the market, even as most people seemed **beyond** thrilled at the prospect. How, I thought, can a machine be a companion? Is it really "looking" at us? (Technicians were quick to give their creation that "ability" when they noted people react to it.) Is it really "thinking"? Is it really "feeling," answering our words with its own based on life experience? The answer is no, no, and no again. It's simply an "it" that has been ingeniously programmed to **appear** to "care"; no more than a doll in the form of a cute seal, dog, or cat that exceptionally talented people have made ever more lifelike.

So, what's the harm in it? None, at first glance. Then comes the realization that it's meant to **substitute** for real people . . .

Interestingly, marketers initially and "aggressively" set their sights on selling companion robots to the elderly, specifically appealing to individual caregivers and, even more so, institutions who care for seniors. (Needless to say, there's more money in getting an institution interested in robots than an individual!) There was the direct "sell" where representatives of robot-manufacturing firms directly contacted likely "buyers." Surely more persuasive, though, were the many articles that increasingly appeared in popular newspapers and magazines (both in print and on-line) reporting how "happy" seniors were with their robots and how eagerly

they clamored for one when only a limited number were made available to institutions for “try-out” purposes. “Lucky” seniors who got a robot were seen talking to them, telling them their troubles. They were seen sharing their memories with them. Seniors were seen caring for them as if these robots were their children. And in order to keep this “fantasy” going, when a robot broke, we could read about how mass funerals were held for them (many seem to have broken), encouraged by humans who knew full well these were robots!

In short, institutions quickly realized the “value” of robots: they were “efficient and economical.” They conversed with the elderly as needed, and oftentimes, were programmed to react to a senior’s touch. They were economical in that Aides didn’t have to spend time with seniors just talking and keeping them company. Indeed, Aides happily reported how nursing home residents were kept “busy” by their robots leaving them free to do other things. Ironically, this last may very well make nursing home administrators especially happy! For while administrators may heartily deny it now, they will surely be “slimming down” their staff and hence, their costs, firing employees who have become extraneous to the workings of the home—for how many “other things” can be found for Aides to do and how many will really be needed for those tasks!

In more recent years the marketers of companion robots are setting their sights on children, now specifically appealing to parents. Again, parents, like the caregivers of the elderly, are told that their creation will engage a child, conversing with the child whenever and wherever. . . . Again, like the aforementioned caregivers, parents are given to understand that this will not only keep a child busy but, even more importantly, act as a kind of “babysitter,” freeing them to concentrate on other things . . .

So, the question in all this is, can a robot really substitute for a human? Does it make any sort of a difference whether we interact with a machine or a real live person?

According to Sherry Turkle, psychologist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has been doing research in this area for years now, it very much does. “Face to face conversation,” she writes, “is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It’s where we develop the capacity for empathy. It’s where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood.” This, in turn, she importantly notes, leads among other things to “connection” and “community.”

Coming from a whole other background, Klaus Schwab, engineer, economist, founder and executive chairman of the Economic Forum, co-founder of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, author of the book The Fourth Industrial Revolution, and an admitted “technology enthusiast and early adapter,” while praising much that new technologies offer us, recognizes, too, the “dehumanizing” elements inherent in **some** of these offerings. His advice: Make sure these technologies work for *all* of us and do not “diminish some of our quintessential human capacities.”

And there are more people who feel the same, both about robots and technology, generally . . .

Finally, I wonder why we’re so eager to be free of each other when some of the most memorable moments happen when we’re together . . .

P.S. Recently, I was at a local pharmacy, a part of a very well- known chain. Instead of a cashier, there was a “talking” register accepting payment. That register actually made me feel like a **machine**, which really left me frightened at what the future may hold . . .

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I was hearing more and more about the "wonders" of robot companions-- especially from tech people-- and realized that the "other side" of the issue needed to be heard. For in fact, I'm not against technology at all. In many cases it has made life better. But it must work for us. We shouldn't be working for it!*

BIO: *Dr. Diane Cypkin, Professor of Media, Communication and Visual Arts at Pace University has won the Kenan and Carol S Russet Award for teaching excellence, and the National Jefferson Award, and Pace President’s Award for Community Service. She has had various scholarly manuscripts published in various academic journals . . . but she also loves thinking and expressing her views on lots of different everyday things . . .*