

More than a sex-robot: robot-human loving relationships

The infinite possibilities of technology, right? Sex-robots are on the market (mostly in US and Japan) and more realistic and advanced versions will probably be available worldwide in the future. Although there's much discussion about sex-robots, the discussion seems to focus on whether they would have a bad effect on people's ability to form human relationships. But what if we could use robots especially for loving relationships? Would it be a good idea to develop love-robots?

We already know of some human-doll relationships (https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/silicone-love-davecats-life-with-his-synthetic-wife-and-mistress), in which a human-being considers himself to be in a mutually loving relationship with his doll. This strikes us as confusing because we think this love is extremely one-sided. But what if this man doesn't have a relationship with a doll, but with an advanced sex-robot of a very sophisticated kind? I'm pretty sure that in the future we could combine sex-robots with artificial intelligence.

Suppose that people who have difficulty forming a loving relationship could get a love-robot, for the sole purpose to have a loving relationship (that might or might not include sex) with the owner. To discover whether this would be a good idea we might want to look at some conditions of loving relationships between humans. What do we consider a good loving relationship between humans and can a robot-human love meet those requirements?

Some people consider a requirement for a good loving relationship that the two people 'fit together' or are 'made for each other'. Some romcoms and some (guilty pleasure-like) songs sometimes maintain that somewhere THE ONE – the other half of your union – is waiting to be found. But you might also believe that, although there must be something you find attractive in each other, relationships and people grow over time. Both scenarios however, don't have to be a problem for a robot-human loving relationship. On the one hand, since we can program a robot, it might be the perfect opportunity to create the one-and-only perfect partner to fit you! We could even program it to change qualities with your changing desires. On the other hand, if you think this is a little bit too creepy or egocentric because it makes growth of human character unnecessary: no problem, you could also get a robot that is not programmed to your wishes and try to figure things out together.

Another requirement for a good loving relationship between humans (and this is related to my previous post on taking a love pill), might be that part of what we value as good in a loving relationship, is that the beloved made the choice to commit to you. I'm not sure if we're able to make the choice to *love* someone or not, but we are able to choose if we *commit* to a person or not. The moment of 'entering' the relationship is always a decision (although it might often not feel as one). When we're in a loving relationship, we consider it a confirmation of our lovability, our attractiveness. But that presupposes that lovers have free will to some extent. As Michael Kühler writes, quoting Erich Fromm, "[t]o love somebody is not just a strong feeling—it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise."ⁱ Similarly, Dylan Evans writes that, "[a]lthough people typically want commitment and fidelity from their partners, they want these things to be the fruit of an ongoing choice, rather than inflexible and unreflexive behavior patterns."ⁱⁱ It is surely not the case that love only consists in a loving commitment that is the result of a free or ongoing choice. However, as the just-cited authors note, it is very plausible to think of this as one key aspect of love, as we ordinarily conceive of it.

You might already feel some storm coming for the robot. The idea is that we must have some choice to commit to a relationship with a person and if this is not the case, this might not be the love we want. We might call it love of a lesser quality?

Of course this doesn't have to be a problem for the endless possibilities of science. We could provide the robot with free will so it indeed could make the choice to commit to the owner. But it also could not. If you would like to buy a robot to have a loving relationship, because, as stated earlier, you have trouble forming a loving relationship with a human-being, I'm not sure if buying a robot would really help. If the robot is free to commit or not commit to you, you have no guarantee for a loving relationship whatsoever.

So it seems to me that inventing love robots because it would contribute to more loving relationships in the world, seems a bit redundant and not worth the effort. To have a loving relationship with a robot, the robot must meet certain conditions, which in turn make the robot more 'human', which in turn might

make creating such a robot kind of unnecessary between the billions of humans that already exist. However, if a person would be okay with a lesser quality of love (whatever that might be) the love robot can still have a purpose.

Some related things to watch:

Her (2013, movie)

Ex Machina (2014, movie)

Be Right Back (2013, episode of Black Mirror)

This was a free translation of, and a response to:

Nyholm, S., & Frank, L. E. (2017). 12 From Sex Robots to Love Robots: Is Mutual Love with a Robot Possible?

This blog was previously published on lottespreeuwenberg.wordpress.com

ⁱ Michael Kühler, 'Loving Persons: Activity and Passivity in Romantic Love' in C. Maurer et al. (eds.) *Love and Its Objects* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 41–55

ⁱⁱ Dylan Evans, 'Wanting the Impossible: The Dilemma at the Heart of Intimate Human-Robot Relationships' in Y. Wilks (ed.) *Close Engagements with Artificial Companions* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), 75–89.