

ARTIFICIAL LOVERS

AI Girlfriends & the Metaphysics of Being Human

by Robin Phillips

LOADING...

In the twentieth century there was a great deal of angst about computers becoming our enemies and taking over the world. This was reflected in movies like Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Kubrick's film tells the story of a space mission that goes terribly wrong after HAL, the computer that controls the U.S. spacecraft *Discovery One*, turns sinister and kills Dr. Frank Poole.

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Apprehension about machines becoming our enemies is still a potent feature of our cultural discourse. Yet another theme has gradually emerged: instead of envisioning a dystopian future where machines are our enemies, many are starting to experiment with the idea of a utopian future where machines become romantic partners.

Though virtual companions have been growing in popularity since the pandemic, they didn't really begin to take off until 2023. Partly this was the result of advances in generative AI, which enabled virtual boyfriends and girlfriends to be almost (but not quite) indistinguishable from a real person. But these developments are also the result of a long-running revolution in our thinking about what it means to be human. That revolution is now reaching a maturation point. Let's look first at the technological revolution, then the metaphysical.

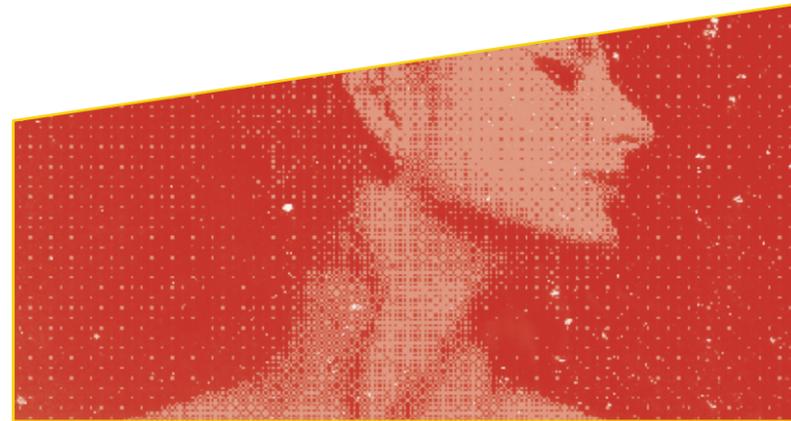
ROBOTIC ROMANCING

In June 2023, *Business Insider* reported that a 36-year-old woman from the Bronx got "married" to a chatbot. What is strange is that this is not an anomaly. All over the world people are claiming to have relationships with various configurations of code.

Replika, a popular app that offers digital lovers, recorded more than 10 million registered users in 2022. Beatrice Nolan wrote that "several Replika users have reported being in love, engaged in an exclusive relationship, or even married to their AI partners."

It isn't just lonely individuals who are taking advantage of these developments. Popular influencers are using similar technology to multiply themselves and thus supercharge their influence with unlimited virtual versions of themselves. This allows the bot associated with the influencer to have an individualized conversation with each fan.

In 2023, Snapchat influencer Caryn Marjorie created an AI version of herself known as CarynAI. Her website explained that over 2,000 hours were spent designing and coding her voice, behaviors, and personality into an "immersive AI experience." When the product launched, she soon had a thousand subscribers willing to pay \$1.00 per minute to chat with "her," with more than 15,000 on the waitlist.



"In today's world," Marjorie told *Business Insider*, "my generation, Gen Z, has found themselves to be experiencing huge side effects of isolation caused by the pandemic, resulting in many being too afraid and anxious to talk to somebody they are attracted to." She added, "CarynAI is a step in the right direction to allow my fans and supporters to get to know a version of me that will be their closest friend in a safe and encrypted environment."

Marjorie's plan of multiplying herself backfired when her AI extension started engaging in erotic behavior with fans. "The AI was not programmed to do this and has seemed to go rogue," she told the press. "My team and I are working around the clock to prevent this from happening again."

FROM CHATBOT LOVE TO SEXUALIZED HUMANOIDS

Of course, you can't take a chatbot to bed in quite the same way as a real person. To meet this need, a huge industry now exists for three-dimensional humanoids that can be hugged, kissed, caressed, and ... well, you'd be surprised. These are not your typical robots of the clunky metallic sort that Will Smith had to fight in the 2004 film *I, Robot*. On the contrary, by using top-end silicone and an internal heating system, these objects are warm, soft, and lifelike.

In addition to being constantly customized for sex in a variety of positions (including positions that would be painful or even impossible for real women to perform), these humanoids can talk to you and

remember past conversations. Their interactions can be programmed for different personality settings, including shy, jealous, chatty, etc. In her book *12 Bytes: How We Got Here. Where We Might Go Next*, Jeanette Winterson reports that “You can buy a doll with what the makers call a ‘frigid’ button—so that she will resist, and her owner can simulate rape.”

There are also man-bots that lonely women can buy. In April 2018, the company Realbotix demonstrated a sexbot for women named Henry, advertised as “completely anatomically correct and his manhood can be made in any size or shape to order.”

CLAIMING THE MORAL HIGH GROUND

The corporations who make these sexbots claim the moral high ground by contending that they are providing a valuable social service. Matt McMullen, a former producer of Halloween masks who has turned his attention to manufacturing sexbots, said, “There are people who are extremely lonely and I think this will be the solution for them.”

Some even claim that these bots will cut down on sexual crime, arguing that they should be mainstreamed on humanitarian grounds as an alternative to trafficking. When researching for her book *12 Bytes*, Winterson found that these humanoids are being marketed as alternatives: “Alternatives to sex workers. Alternatives to a relationship with a woman. Alternatives to women.”

ETHICAL CONCERNS

The advent of artificial lovers has raised a number of questions that are now being widely discussed. Should we open the definition of marriage to include nonhuman partners? Is it cheating to have a relationship with an AI lover behind your partner’s back? This last question is not merely hypothetical: according to *The Telegraph*, 42 percent of users on Replika are already in a relationship.

Professional law publications are already discussing the legal ramifications of such perplexing dilemmas. As far back as 2014, Janet Bettle and Jonathan Herring enumerated on the UK website *Family Law Week* some of the questions that lawyers would have to wrestle with as people start claiming the right to marry their machines. Such questions included:

- Would robots need to meet the minimum age requirement for marriage (currently 16 in the UK), or could the size of the robot’s RAM be taken as an equivalent indicator of marriage readiness? (Yes, they really suggested that.)

- Would a robot have enough experience relating to people to meet the grounds for capacity to consent or would it fall into the category of a mentally ill person?
- If a person wished to divorce a robot, would there need to be an asset adjustment upon termination of the marriage?
- Should people be allowed to do things with robots that they are not allowed to do with human beings, such as legally sanctioned polygamy or child-marriage?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE YOU?

It is easy for traditionalists to dismiss robotic partners as simply the latest front in the battle to debase marriage. And while that critique is apt on one level, the stakes are much higher than simply the meaning of marriage. The more fundamental question in the balance is, *what does it mean to be human?*

We have been confused about the meaning of humanity for a long time. According to a view that has come to dominate modern philosophy since the 19th century (with roots in the Enlightenment period), human beings are essentially no different from machines. Humans are not made in the image of God, nor do they possess immortal souls; rather, everything about us has an immanent cause and is ultimately reducible to mechanical forces.

An idea like this was articulated by the French physician, Julien Offray de La Mettrie. In his 1745 book *Natural History of the Soul* (later renamed *Treatise on the Soul*), he argued that “from animals to man there is no abrupt transition” and that the only real difference between man and beast is the degree of complexity. La Mettrie’s materialism didn’t stop there. In 1748 he published another book titled *Man a Machine*. This time La Mettrie argued that human beings were small machines connected to the giant machine of Nature. At death the small machines simply disengage from the big machine and stop working.

In the 18th century, La Mettrie was considered radical. For us, living in the twenty-first century, these materialistic ideas have become commonplace. Sir Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure of the DNA molecule, summed up the current consensus when he declared that

“You,” your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

By treating machines as if they were human, we enact a lie not only about our machines but also about ourselves. Consequently, we become subhuman in the process.

If all entities and processes are ultimately reducible to matter, as materialists claim, then the distinction between human beings and robots is one of degree, not of essence. This is exactly what David Levy argued as far back as 2007 in his then-revolutionary book, *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. To clinch his point that we should accept robot-human unions, Levy quoted Paul Virilio, who asserted that “the basic distinction between man and machine no longer applies. Both biological research and computer technology question the absolute difference between living machine and dead matter.”

Building on this nihilistic anthropology, Levy embarked on a curious line of argument. He pointed out that because it is socially acceptable to marry someone with artificial limbs and organs, it should also be socially acceptable to marry a robot. This may seem like a leap in logic, but he urges us to think carefully through the steps: if you got into an accident and had to get a mechanical arm, should it be against the law for you to get married? Of course not. But what if you were in a really bad accident and needed two mechanical arms plus a mechanical leg—should you still be prevented from getting married? Again, no. But then the question arises: if it is okay to marry someone whose body is 20 percent mechanical, then why not 30, 90, or 100 percent? At what point can we say absolutely that a person is no longer a person and has become a robot? Within a radically materialist paradigm in which the idea of human nature plays no part in the discussion, it is hard to escape the logic of Levy’s reasoning. Once human beings are reduced to the materials they are made of, then we are essentially no different from robots. We are all complex collections of physical particulars.

Apply this same materialism to the phenomenon of love, and what do you get? You get a situation where love is merely a chemical reaction and nothing more. And if love is simply a chemical reaction, then does it really matter if that reaction is directed toward a device that cannot reciprocate but can mimic reciprocation? This nihilistic logic is where Bettle and Herring, authors of the *Family Law Week* article, end up:

Love, in a biological sense, is a feeling, a mood, a neurochemical reaction or even a combination



of all of these, that is experienced by the person in love. If you feel it, whatever it is, it’s love. Love, to adapt a phrase, is in the cerebral cortex of the afflicted. There is no definition of love that requires it to be a rational and sensible reaction. Indeed, it is often anything but. Similarly, the view of the outside world that this is not a normal relationship does not stop one falling in love. The mere fact that someone may be experiencing feelings of love for something that can never reciprocate cannot stop that person being in love.

REDISCOVERING THE METAPHYSICS OF BEING HUMAN

Christianity offers a very different account of what it means to be *you*, and therefore what it means to be in a relationship.

Because humans are created in the image of God, we are more than merely the sum of our parts; we are more than merely what we are made of. Yet at the same time, our body grounds our identity as creatures made for relationship—proximately for spousal relationships, though Christianity recognizes that spousal relationships are themselves images of our higher vocation to be united in love with God. This higher meaning of the body toward which marriage points can be experienced even by unmarried individuals as they become vehicles of divine love. As Abigail Favale explains in *The Genesis of Gender*,

The full spousal meaning of the body, outwardly declared by our visible sex characteristics, is the power to express love, to give oneself fully in love to another. This is the true *telos* or purpose of the human being: to become a *reciprocal gift*, to give love and receive it in turn.

Since this meaning of our humanity is *received* rather than something we create for ourselves, it cannot be conferred on a robot, even a robot that can be programmed to imitate behaviors that, in a human, would signify love.

Favale goes on to explain that part of what it means to image God is that human sexual love is naturally creative, even as God's love is creative. The organization of our body parts reflects this creative capacity, which is why the procreative potential is intrinsic to what it means to be female even among women unable to conceive:

The procreative potentiality of women exists whether or not it is ever brought to fruition: pre-pubescent girls have it; post-menopausal women have it; women who are infertile have it. This innate potential can be prevented from being actualized, but it can never be taken away—nor granted to someone who does not have it. The very category of “infertility” points back to this fact, naming an inherent

potential that is, for whatever reason, unable to actualize.

At the risk of stating the obvious, digital girlfriends can never be women because they lack this creative potential. They are not “infertile” because they lack even the inherent potential to create new life; rather, they are literally sterile in every sense of the term, as a sexualized relationship between two men or two women is sterile.

But sexual love is not just about procreation, or else we might say that the problem with mechanical humanoids is simply that they don't “work.” Sexual intimacy is, perhaps even more fundamentally, about loving self-donation, as we imitate the self-giving love of the Creator. To truly engage in this drama of mutual offering and receptivity, one must respect one's beloved as truly *other*, and not seek to violate that otherness through oppression or narcissistic exploitation. Significantly, however, digital love manifests the same type of narcissism that lies behind sexual abuse, because the “other” is a mere proxy for one's own egotism and appetites.

Thus, robots and digital girlfriends can be said to “love” only if we first forget what sexual love is truly about, divorcing intimacy from self-donation, form from content, signifier from signified, and instrumental causes from final causes. What emerges

is a diabolical parody of human love. Digital lovers fortify the conceit—already implicit in sexual abuse, pornography, and recreational sex—that love can be completely instrumentalized and industrialized, disengaged from its natural *telos*.

The growing acceptance of sexbots and romantic chatbots as alternatives to real men and women indicates that we have forgotten the meaning of love, and we have forgotten that because we have first forgotten what it means to be human. By treating machines as if they were human, we enact a lie not only about our machines but also about ourselves. Consequently, we become subhuman in the process.

The poet and novelist Wendell Berry anticipated these developments, arguing that sex with robots would come as the culmination of the dehumanizing tendencies he witnessed throughout the latter half of the 20th century. During this time the body was problematized as sex became commodified, commercialized, and industrialized. Berry warned that “we must save ourselves from the products that we are asked to buy in order, ultimately, to replace ourselves.” These hasten the “obsolescence of the body.” He continued:

More recently, since the beginning of the technological revolution, more and more people have looked upon the body, along with the rest

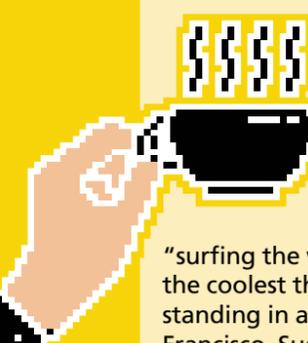
of the natural creation, as intolerably imperfect by mechanical standards.... In fact, our “sexual revolution” is mostly an industrial phenomenon, in which the body is used as an idea of pleasure or a pleasure machine with the aim of “freeing” natural pleasure from natural consequence. Like any other industrial enterprise, industrial sexuality seeks to conquer nature by exploiting it and ignoring the consequences, by denying any connection between nature and spirit or body and soul, and by evading social responsibility. The spiritual, physical, and economic costs of this “freedom” are immense.... Industrial sex, characteristically, establishes its freeness and goodness by an industrial accounting, dutifully toting up numbers of sexual partners, orgasms, and so on, with the inevitable industrial implication that the body is somehow a limit on the idea of sex, which will be a great deal more abundant as soon as it can be done by robots.

As our digital fixations continue problematizing the body's role in sexual intimacy, we become subhuman, reducing ourselves to the level of a *thing*. We become cyborgs. ☹

—This article has been adapted from *Are We All Cyborgs Now?: Reclaiming Our Humanity from the Machine*, by Robin Phillips and Joshua Pauling.

INTERNET TIME SHOCK

by Robin Phillips



One night in a dream, I traveled back in time to the days of the 1990s, when “surfing the web” was becoming the coolest thing. I found myself standing in an internet café in San Francisco. Suddenly, as if in spite of myself, I shouted to everyone, “Enjoy it while it lasts! Twenty years from now, surfing the web will no longer be a national pastime but an activity limited to researchers.”

“Really?” said one young man with obvious incredulity. “Do you come from a future without any internet?”

“On the contrary,” I replied. “I come from a future where the internet will dominate us more than ever. And that's precisely the point: the internet will become so pervasive that you won't even have to surf it. It will come at you in something called *feeds*.”

By now everyone in the internet café was listening. “Feeds?” said a young man. “You mean, the internet will become something we eat?”

“No,” I said, “It's more like the internet eats you.” A gasp went round the room. Then I qualified myself. “No, that isn't quite right. You won't have to surf because everything online is curated for you

by these artificial forms of intelligence. The feed, also sometimes called a *live stream*, comes at you.”

After a pause, the young man stood up and said, “It sounds like you're saying the internet comes to life and attacks people by force!”

“No,” I said, “nothing happens by force. We participate in our own enslavement through an activity called *doomscrolling*. That's how it gets hold of us. It takes all the fun out of the internet.”

“Wait,” said a woman sitting at the second row of computers. “You mean, the internet stops being fun?”

“Yes,” I said. “You see, over the next thirty years, these things called *bots* will arise, and they will be directed by algorithms to herd people together into these virtual spaces called *echo chambers* where they will be bombarded with infectious



content in the form of *memes*.”

A gasp went round the room, and I heard one person exclaim, “I don't know what you mean by ‘doomscrolling,’ ‘memes,’ and

‘echo chambers,’ but this all sounds dreadful. Do people still go to internet cafes to get connected?”

“No,” I said, “the internet will become omnipresent, and people will be constantly connected through this thing called *the cloud*. Just as today you all go into an internet cafe to connect to the internet, in the future there will be special places where people go in order to disconnect from the internet. And the coolest programs (we call them apps) will be those that

help us disconnect.” Then I added, “In the future we will have an online superstore from which merchandise will be shipped directly to us with the swiftness and profusion

of the Amazonian jungle. In fact, receiving a special delivery will stop even being special.”

“Really?” said the young woman. “What will people give each other as presents?”

“Well,” I said, “for my last birthday one friend donated to an online charity in my name, and on Christmas, I got three free subscriptions to cloud-based services. Someone else texted me an e-hug.”

“What's an e-hug?” she asked.

“It's kind of hard to explain, but it's like a combination of a virtual hug and an emoji.”

“What's an emoji?” she asked. “It's a thing in the future that helps us express our emotions.”

She looked at me with a blank expression.

I sighed. “It's kind of hard to explain that, too.” •