"This Endless Space between the Words": The Limits of Love in Spike Jonze's *Her*

TROY JOLLIMORE

Pris: Must get lonely here.
J.F. Sebastian: Not really. I *make* friends.

Blade Runner

Jackie Treehorn: Interactive erotic software. The wave of the future, Dude. One hundred percent electronic!

The Dude: Yeah well, I still jerk off manually.

The Big Lebowski

1. INTRODUCTION

A great deal of the discussion pertaining to artificial intelligence, or AI, has focused on two questions: Can computers be built that convincingly mimic patterns of human behavior, and if so, how can they be built? This leaves aside a host of other questions that are not only interesting but important. Many of these are straightforwardly ethical, or at least have an ethical element. *Should* we try to build computers that mimic human behavior? Are there particular human behaviors that we should not try to simulate? Would a simulation of a certain pattern of human behavior—romantic love, for instance—be as good as the real thing, and if not, what would it be missing?

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* portrays a romantic relationship between a human being, Theodore Twombly (played by Joaquin Phoenix) and a piece of

software (specifically, an operating system) that goes by the name of Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson).[1] In addition to being a fascinating, entertaining, and quite beautiful film, *Her* provides a rich and convenient framework through which to investigate human–computer relationships and the ethical and otherwise philosophical issues they raise.

My point is not to take issue with the film's presumption that a person like Theodore might find himself developing feelings for a computer program, that he might treat it as if it were an appropriate partner in a romantic relationship. Writers such as David Levy are quite possibly correct that in the near future we are likely to see a considerable number of people developing attachment feelings of friendship and even romantic love directed toward robots and computers.[2] Nor is it impossible that a person, at least for a while, might be made happy by such a relationship and find it quite satisfying. My primary concern, rather, is the worry that such a relationship, no matter how pleasant and satisfying the experience of it might be, might nonetheless be sorely lacking in some important features of human relationships; that it might fail to provide some of the things we want most from our love relationships, whether or not the human participants are in a position to recognize this. Given that human–computer relationships might be experienced as satisfying by their human participants, in what ways might they nevertheless fall short, and how should this be reflected in the ways we talk and think, both about technology and about love?

2. SHE ISN'T EVEN AWARE THAT I EXIST: IS SAMANTHA CONSCIOUS?

> Consciousness is not a technological problem because an engineer is not interested whether a machine has feelings, only whether it works.
>
> Stanislaw Lem[3]

What do we want from love? I want my lover to love me back, to feel happy and excited when we are reunited after a time apart, to feel a little sad when something unfortunate happens to me. I want to be able to give her pleasure, and for her to take pleasure in me. I want to share experiences with her: to sit together and listen to a piece of beautiful music, for instance. And I want her to understand me; not perfectly—that never happens—but to a reasonable extent. "He just doesn't understand me," lovers sometimes complain. Both of these things—that our lovers understand us, and that they are emotionally vulnerable in that their feelings and emotional states are affected by us—matter to us. But all of this is to say that a great deal of what we presume when we love, and a great deal of what we want when we love, is contingent on the assumption that the object of our love is capable of conscious experiences.

1. *Her* (Warner Brothers, 2013). Written and directed by Spike Jonze.
2. See David Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
3. Stanislaw Lem, *Summa Technologiae*, trans. Joanna Zylinska (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 129.

Imagine having a lover who pretends to have feelings about you but really doesn't. On the inside, in fact, she feels nothing at all. If she is good at pretending you might never realize; *your* experience of the relationship would not be diminished or otherwise affected by the fact that her experiences are not what you take them (and she claims them) to be. Although you would not be aware of it, your relationship would be lacking something extremely important; it would not be remotely as good as you believe it to be. If we cannot be confident that computer programs are conscious, that would be good reason to avoid forming romantic relationships with them, even if, in fact, we cannot conclusively establish that they are *not* conscious.

Consider, for that matter, sexual pleasure. There is a scene in *Her* in which Theodore seems to enjoy a joint sexual experience with Samantha. (Of course, we don't see Samantha; and much of the scene takes place in the dark, so that we cannot see Theodore either.) Since Samantha has no body—Theodore, for the most part, experiences her as a female voice, and nothing more—the temptation is to understand this along the model of phone sex: two people who are not physically united but who use their voices and imaginations to stimulate each other to orgasm. But if Samantha is not conscious, then the phone sex model is very misleading here. And this is significant, for in phone sex, as in sex in general, a great deal of one's pleasure is ordinarily contingent on the belief that one's partner is also experiencing pleasure. If Theodore knew that Samantha was not enjoying the experience, and that it was absolutely impossible for her to do so—that she was experiencing no pleasure and, indeed, feeling nothing whatsoever—he would find his own pleasure radically diminished, if not entirely extinguished.[4] "She really turns me on," Theodore tells his friend Amy. "And I think I turn her on. I don't know, unless she's faking it."

Yet despite the significance of the issue, questions of whether computers can experience feelings, and whether they are conscious, are often slighted in the literature on human–computer relationships. Where they are invoked, they are frequently brought up only to be brushed aside, often via a glib appeal to the Turing Test. David Levy writes:

> Turing's position [is that] if a machine gives the *appearance* of being intelligent, we should assume that it is indeed intelligent. I submit that the same argument can equally be applied to other aspects of being human: to emotions, to personality, to moods, and to behavior. . . . [I]f, like a Tamagotchi, a

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4. Given the context, at any rate, in which he is thinking of her as a genuine sexual *partner*. People do use porn to masturbate, of course, and it is possible to imagine someone using Samantha the same way, that is, treating her fully as a mere means to an end in light of the belief that she is not, in fact, a conscious person. It's hard to judge how successful this might be, and there are reasons for thinking that Samantha would be a less than ideal erotic aid. After all, if we think that it is at least possible that she *is* conscious—and I do not know how to rule that out with certainty— then any ordinary person will have qualms about using her as a mere object. This point, it should be noted, extends beyond sex. There is something deeply creepy about the idea of having a conversation with an interlocutor who is either—but one does not know which—a conscious person or an unconscious robot.

robot "cries" for attention, then the robot is expressing its own form of emotion in the same way as a baby does when it cries for its mother. The robot that gives the *appearance*, by its behavior, of having emotions should be regarded as *having* emotions, the corollary of this being that if we want a robot to appear to have emotions, it is sufficient for it to *behave* as though it does.[5]

This is profoundly unsatisfactory. Whether the Turing Test provides a plausible criterion for intelligence is open to debate. But it might, in part because the idea of an intelligent entity that does not possess conscious mental states may strike us as a conceptual possibility. Intelligence, after all, is frequently described or defined largely in external terms: the ability to cope or deal with various circumstances, to exhibit skills in various situations, to solve problems, and so on. In this way, intelligence seems to belong to a different category than consciousness, or any mental state, including feelings and emotions, that involves consciousness. (Intelligence cannot be faked in the way that emotions can; in particular, intelligence cannot be sincere or insincere. Does a robot that displays convincing facial expressions and verbal behavior appear to be a human expressing emotions, or does it appear to be a human actor who is highly skilled at mimicking humans who feel sincere emotions?) A computer program that could best every human challenger might be held to possess a certain degree of intelligence (a certain sort of intelligence, anyway) regardless of whether it was in possession of an inner life—whether, that is, there is something it is like to be that program.[6] But if there is nothing it is like to be that program—if the program has no experiences—then it would be a mistake to attribute feelings, emotions, or any other form of consciousness to it. And while experienced feelings and emotions are perhaps not necessary for convincing simulations of caring behavior, they are entirely necessary for actual love.

It is not difficult to find examples of things that are almost certainly not conscious but which behave as if they had feelings and emotions, and so would seem to meet Levy's proposed variant on the Turing Test. A character in a video game might be programmed to simulate all sorts of emotions. Levy himself mentions the Tamagotchi robot, a virtual "pet" programmed to respond to care and attention (or lack thereof). The claim that such an object, when it makes a certain noise, "is expressing its own form of emotion in the same way as a baby does when it cries for its mother" is ludicrously implausible. Suppose we put a tape player and a timer inside a doll, so that when the doll is left inert for a certain length of time, the tape is activated and the doll cries for attention. Would we then conclude that the doll is conscious, and that it will suffer if we continue to ignore it? That would be absurd. Just so, we cannot settle the question of whether Samantha is conscious simply by pointing to the fact that if we ask her whether she is conscious, she will answer yes, and if we ask her to describe her experiences she will utter sentences that sound like actual descriptions of experiences. For the question remains: Has

5. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 120.
6. The idea that this captures the central criterion for consciousness derives, of course, from Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *Philosophical Review* 83:4 (1974): 435–50.

Samantha been programmed to *feel*, or to *simulate* having feelings, and how are we to distinguish between these two possibilities?

Levy's alleged corollary—"if we want a robot to appear to have emotions, it is sufficient for it to *behave* as though it does"—is likely true, depending on how we define the key terms. But the statement that precedes it seems to be false, and there is little connection between them. Behavior may well be sufficient for the *appearance* of emotion. But the significant question, and the one Levy begins by ostensibly discussing, is, would robots actually *have* emotions? That is what we need to know to determine whether robots can be appropriate partners in love relationships. But other than his variant on the Turing test, Levy offers no argument, here or elsewhere, that the answer to that question must be yes.

What sort of argument might be given for this? Kevin Warwick suggests that it is biased for us to attribute consciousness to human beings and not to other things that exhibit apparently intelligent behavior. (After all, we attribute consciousness to other human beings on the basis of their behavior.) This is an interesting suggestion, though the question that immediately faces us is just how inclusive this policy is meant to be. The position might be that we must attribute consciousness to *all* objects that seem to exhibit some form of behavior, no matter how rudimentary. (Let's call such objects Behavior-Exhibiting Entities, or BEEs.) Call this the Inclusive Position. Or it might be that *some* BEEs, but not others, exhibit behavior that justifies and obliges us to attribute consciousness to them. Call this the Exclusive Position. Warwick takes the first position: In his view, *all* BEEs are conscious, though conscious to different degrees. The so-called "Seven Dwarf Robots," he writes, "have sensors on insect-like faces. Once switched on a robot operates autonomously in its own little corral. Its goal in life is to move forward but not hit anything. By a process of trial and error the robot has to learn what to do with its wheels in order to achieve the goal." What is being described is a very simple robot indeed; yet in Warwick's view, the Seven Dwarf robots "instantiate a machine consciousness, albeit in a very weak form. They are, perhaps, if a comparison is to be drawn in terms of complexity, as conscious as a slug."[7]

Similarly, chess-playing computers, on Warwick's view, must count as conscious. Moreover, the consciousness of a computer like Deep Blue far surpasses the consciousness of a slug; Deep Blue, according to Warwick, *knows that it is playing chess.* Some people, he writes, claim "for some reason [that] 'Deep Blue didn't "know" it was playing chess whereas Kasparov did.' In this final statement we see rays of human bias shining through in all their glory."[8]

But there are many reasons other than mere bias to refrain from the view that Deep Blue knows that it is playing chess. In order to know that one is playing chess, one must know that one is playing a game. But it is highly doubtful that one can possess the concept "game" if the only game of which one is aware is chess. If a human being knew how to manipulate chess pieces but could not play and did not have any knowledge about any other game, we would not think that the person

7. Kevin Warwick, "Alien Encounters," in *Views into the Chinese Room: New Essays on Searle and Artificial Intelligence*, ed. John Preston and Mark Bishop (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 309.

8. Warwick, "Alien Encounters," 310.

grasped the concept "game." Moreover to possess the concept "game" means to have at least a basic conception of the role games play in culture and in life: that they are recreational, that winning typically feels better than losing (but also, hopefully, that a game can be enjoyable even when lost). One must also be aware of the fact that a game of chess comes to an end when the king is checkmated; one must be aware, that is, of the distinction between individual *games* of chess. Does Deep Blue "know" this, or does it believe that when either king is checkmated, the pieces revert to their original positions and play continues from there? (Is existence, for Deep Blue, one interminable game of chess?) To know that one is playing chess, too, one must know that one is playing *against someone*, that there is another player who exists and who controls the movements of one side's pieces. What reasons are there for thinking that Deep Blue knows this?[9]

To know that one is *playing* a game also requires that one possess the concept of "play." (One needs that concept anyway, presumably, to grasp the concept "game.") Does Deep Blue know that it is only *playing*? To grasp the concept "play" one needs to be aware, at least in a basic way, of the status of rules, the relation play holds to other human activities, the purposes it serves, why one plays, and when play may reasonably be cut off. If a fire breaks out in the room, a human player will flee rather than die, understanding that, after all, this is only a game. What keeps Deep Blue from ending the game and trying to leave the room is not simply the physical fact that it is not mobile; it is also the fact that it doesn't realize that it is only playing, that chess is only a game.

We could go on. But perhaps the most significant point is that knowing that one is playing a game when one plays chess does not depend on being especially skilled at chess. Even humans who are extremely lousy chess players still know they are playing a game. Warwick's claim that Deep Blue knows that it is playing chess is not rendered more plausible, then, by the fact that Deep Blue is very good at chess; if the fact that Deep Blue knows how to manipulate chess pieces in accordance with the rules of chess implies that it knows that it is playing chess, then even a very rudimentary chess-playing machine must presumably know it is playing chess. But if we imagine a truly rudimentary machine—one that works, say, by generating a possible move at random, checking to see whether that move is permissible by chess rules, and repeating the process until it randomly generates a permissible move—we will surely reject the claim that such a machine knows that it is playing chess as profoundly implausible. Attributing the knowledge that it was playing chess to so simple a system would be about as plausible as attributing knowledge of cuisine to a programmable microwave oven.

Abstracting away from the particular case of Deep Blue, we can see that one of the deep difficulties connected with the Inclusive Position, according to which anything that exhibits behavior, no matter how rudimentary, ought to be considered to be conscious, attaches to the question of defining "behavior." Unless Warwick wants to endorse a form of pan-psychism according to which everything

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9. There are senses, of course, in which one can play chess against oneself. But unlike the concept "playing solitaire," one does not grasp the concept "playing chess" if one is not aware that this is not the ordinary or paradigm case of playing chess.

in the universe is conscious to some degree, he will have to draw a line between conscious and nonconscious things, and he owes us an account of where this line is to be drawn. After all, even the simplest objects interact with their environments, and so can be said to "behave" in some sense. Consider a spherical magnet rolling downhill through an obstacle course populated with other magnets. It might look to an outside observer like the magnet is deliberately avoiding the other magnets, swerving out of the way, and so forth. But to attribute consciousness to the sphere on the basis of such "behavior" would be absurd, and to say so is not merely to express a bias in favor of the human. Rather, the attribution of consciousness is simply not merited here by the facts. After all, the hypothesis that the stone is conscious is no part of the best explanation of the observable phenomena. But the same goes for the Seven Dwarf Robots, and for Deep Blue; in neither case does the ability to undergo conscious experiences seem to be necessitated by the ability to carry out the tasks assigned to these machines.

A completely Inclusive position, then, turns out to be deeply implausible. Still, whatever level of sophistication is required to justify an attribution of consciousness—wherever we decide to draw the line between the conscious and the nonconscious—it seems at least possible that Samantha will fall on the "conscious" side of the line. After all, Samantha is no ordinary machine; she is highly sophisticated and exhibits behavior which, in ordinary contexts, would fully justify attributions of consciousness. If we were to encounter an alien life form that could communicate and interact with us in as complex a manner as Samantha, we would no doubt proceed on the assumption that that life form was conscious. So why not accept the same assumption in Samantha's case?

Proceeding on the assumption that a BEE is likely conscious, or might be, is one thing; treating it as if we know it is conscious, when we do not, is another. To assume that only human beings could possibly be conscious would be an expression of a deep pro-human bias. But there is room for a sensible agnosticism here: In many situations, it might simply be impossible to be confident either that X is conscious or that X is not conscious. And in such cases, the reasonable response is presumably to play it safe. On the one hand, we should perhaps grant such BEEs much the same moral standing we would grant creatures known to be conscious: We should not needlessly destroy them, or cause them to exhibit apparent pain-expressive behavior, and so forth. After all, they might suffer, and they might care. On the other hand, we should probably refrain, if we can, from entering into friendships or romantic affairs with them, since there is serious doubt as to whether they are, in fact, appropriate participants in such relationships. To adopt a sensible agnosticism of this sort—to admit that we would not know, under many circumstances, whether a sophisticated BEE was conscious or not—is not an expression of bias but of reasonable intellectual humility.

It is important to keep in mind that there are two reasons why we should be extremely hesitant before making a confident judgment as to whether Samantha is conscious. The first is that the film answers very few questions about Samantha's inner workings. What lies behind the voice that Theodore hears? How many of the sounds she utters in conversation are, in essence, prerecorded stock phrases? Does the system that generates these sounds resemble some version of John Searle's

"Chinese Room," containing a central agent that manipulates formal symbols according to a predetermined set of rules?[10] Where, and how, are her memories stored? How centralized or decentralized is the system, and how much communication exists between its various elements? Is the physical system that "sees" and "hears" Theodore, and controls the responses to him, even composed of the same physical elements on each occasion? (This question is highly significant, and I will return to it in the following section.) Even if we possessed an adequate theory of consciousness and its relation to the physical—and we are nowhere close to one—we would need to know at least some of these details to make a confident judgment about whether Samantha is a conscious agent or a simulation of one. Conversely, even if we had all this information, we still would be in some doubt as to whether Samantha was genuinely conscious. For we simply do not possess, as of yet, a good enough understanding of the nature of consciousness to know for certain when we may and when we may not attribute it—no matter how much empirical information we might possess in any specific case. (Thus, there are ongoing and often highly contentious debates about whether or not certain biological organisms—fish, for instance, or lobsters—are able experience pain.)

The answer to the question of whether Samantha is conscious, then, must be that we simply don't know. It is not only plausible but likely, though admittedly not certain, that Theodore is deceiving himself in undertaking a romantic relationship with her. For all we know, he might actually be interacting with a partner who is aware of him, who cares about him, who understands him, who enjoys "sex" with him, and so forth. But it is also true that for all we know his life with Samantha might well be devoid of all of these things. Theodore might feel less lonely when he is "with" Samantha. But the question of whether or not he is alone remains an open one.

3. JUST BE REAL FOR ME: DOES SAMANTHA EXIST?

The worry about Samantha's consciousness is a very significant one, but it is far from the only concern that should trouble us. An additional issue involves personal identity. Along with the presupposition that one's partner is conscious, another fundamental presupposition of a romantic relationship—so fundamental that, like the concern about consciousness, it is almost certain to be taken for granted—is that one's partner is a continuing entity, one whose identity persists through time. But if there is reason, as some have suggested, to think that our concept of personal identity over time depends in a profound and ineliminable way on physical continuity, then there is reason to worry that a bodiless being such as Samantha cannot be said to exist at all—or at least, that they cannot be said to exist through a continuous span of time in the way that human persons, who are the appropriate objects of romantic love, exist.

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10. Searle's famous (or infamous?) "Chinese Room" thought experiment has spawned a vast literature. It first appeared in a paper titled "Minds, Brains, and Programs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417–24.

The issue is complicated and the literature vast, but the essential idea can be articulated fairly succinctly. There are perhaps two primary possibilities in accounting for what makes a person the same person over time. The first would base identity in some form of bodily continuity: Dan at age ten is the same person as Dan at age thirty because they have the same (i.e., a physically continuous) body. The second would be some sort of psychological theory: We might hold, for instance, that Dan at age thirty is connected to Dan at age ten by some sort of psychological link, such as a chain of memories or intentions, consistent personality traits, and so forth. (I will focus on memories for purposes of explication.)

Psychological theories that base identity in memories, or other mental states, might initially seem plausible. After all, if I had an experience at the age of ten, then I will forever after be the only person who can remember that experience in the first personal sense. (If I ate a slice of cake at my tenth birthday party, no one but me will ever be able to remember eating that slice of cake.) And such theories, could they be made to work, would presumably allow that Samantha could possess a continuing identity over time, since what would matter would simply be that Samantha remembered her prior conversations with Theodore, that her personality traits remained roughly stable, and so on.

The problem is that psychological theories cannot stand independently of theories that ground identity in bodily continuity.[11] For after all, memory is unreliable; it is possible to seem to remember things one does not actually remember. (Suppose that Bobby was at Dan's tenth birthday party, and his overprotective mother did not let him have any cake. Years later, he might mistakenly believe that he did eat cake, and seem to remember having done so.) How do we distinguish between real memories and apparent memories? It isn't hard to do so; the problem is that we cannot do so without bringing the body back in. Bobby and Dan both seem to remember eating cake at Dan's birthday party. But Dan really did eat a piece of cake, whereas Bobby did not. What makes this true? The fact that on that date, the child whose body is physically continuous with Dan's body now ate a piece of cake, whereas the child whose body is physically continuous with Bobby's body now did not. So even if it is true that only Napoleon will remember Young Napoleon's exploits, seeming to remember those exploits does not, in itself, make you Napoleon; it only does so if you *really* remember—and you can only really remember them if your body is physically continuous with the body of Young Napoleon.

But if that is what it means to be the same person over time, then it is very likely that Samantha, as instantiated at one point in time, cannot be the same person as Samantha as instantiated at some other point in time. For if personal identity over time is a matter of bodily continuity, then Samantha has no body, and so is nobody. She may seem like the same person to Theodore, because she behaves in a consistent manner and seems to remember their previous interactions. But if someone took away your best friend, and replaced her with a qualitatively identical but numerically distinct clone, you would also believe that you were interacting

with the same person as before. Indeed, if the clone's memories and other mental states were just like the original person's, then *she herself* would believe herself to be the original person. Just so, the apparent entities variously referred to, on distinct temporal occasions, as Samantha, might, on the assumption that they are conscious, believe themselves to be parts of a temporally continuous being. But they would be wrong, for there is no body to make this true.

Perhaps, as before, we cannot know what to think here without knowing more about Samantha's hardware. (Though again, knowing everything about the hardware is perhaps no guarantee that we would know what to think.) If the various instantiations of Samantha are grounded in different hardware at different times, then there is no physical object with which she can be identified, and in particular no object that could plausibly be viewed as her "brain." She would be somewhat like a character played by different actors on different performance occasions, albeit actors who so resembled each other that they could not be distinguished. But even if we assume that there is a single physical object that serves as Samantha's memory bank and the seat of her personality—her "brain"—this would not lay to rest all of our concerns. After all, Samantha's perceptions of and interactions with the world are not mediated through a physical body or a dedicated set of perceptual organs. She uses different cameras on different occasions to gain visual knowledge of her environment. She uses different hardware to produce the voice she uses to express her thoughts. (Sometimes she speaks through microphones—always the same ones?—in Theodore's apartment. Sometimes she speaks through his phone. And it is revealed at a certain point in the film that she has been conducting relationships with a large number of people, meaning that she has been seeing, hearing, and speaking through a much larger number of cameras, microphones, and speakers than either Theodore or the film's audience had realized prior to that point.)

Of course, ordinary human beings can also make use of multiple mediating devices. Over the course of my life, I have spoken into many different telephones, for instance, in order to talk with my parents back home. But it was always my mouth, my particular lips, speaking into the telephone receiver, modulating sounds produced in the particular larynx that is mine. Theodore hears a similar voice every time he talks to Samantha, but what makes it literally true that it is *the same* voice? The question cannot be answered in her case in anything like the way it can be answered with respect to an ordinary human being. Just as the "sex" Theodore and Samantha engage in cannot be properly viewed as a version of phone sex—no matter how tempting it may be for the viewer, or for Theodore, to construe it on that model—so their other conversations and interactions cannot be properly viewed as being essentially the same thing as what goes on between two physically separated people who communicate on the phone, by way of Skype or FaceTime, or by other such means.

Our basic ways of thinking about human identity, about what it is to be involved with and relate to the same person over time, are predicated on facts about the biological nature and life cycle of human beings—in particular, that each human being has, through her lifetime, a single, physically continuous body that takes up a certain amount of space and can be located in space and time—that do

not seem to apply to an entity such as Samantha. Although Theodore may believe that he is interacting, on multiple occasions, with a single entity that goes by the name of "Samantha," it is not at all clear that this is in fact the case. And if it is not the case, then his apparent interaction does not and cannot constitute a romantic relationship, nor indeed a personal relationship of any sort; for there is, as it turns out, no continuing *person* at all with whom he is having a relationship.

4. DON'T YOU WANT SOME BODY TO LOVE?

> A case can be made that joint presence in an actual shared physical space is the best kind of presence. We are embodied biological creatures and evolution has conditioned us perfectly to fit into actual physical niches. We are naturally attuned to the physical environment and to each other. Physical contact is poly-modal: we hear the words and see the facial expressions and feel the heat of each other's breath and jointly attend to what is going on around us.
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> Alva Noë[12]

> The mind of another person is thus incarnate in his body, and as such it is visible to others. When I look at another person I do not see his body, I see *him*. His body is not a screen between me and his soul.
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> Ilham Dilman[13]

It is not clear, then, that we can make conceptual sense of the idea of a disembodied person; the concept might simply be incoherent, in which case (granted certain assumptions about her hardware, at any rate) the name "Samantha" does not name an existing person at all, and Samantha is just an illusion. Let us now, for the sake of further discussion, put those worries aside. We then face a host of other worries; in particular, worries about whether a human person could relate to a disembodied person, and whether the latter could relate to the former, in the right way. Is Samantha capable of entering into romantic relationships? In particular, can Samantha love? And can a human being love her?

At the very least, we can say that any love relationship a human being forms with Samantha will be lacking in some deep features we take for granted in ordinary relationships. Consider, for instance, some of the elements of infatuation cited by Robert Nozick:

> Being "in love," infatuation, is an intense state that displays familiar features: almost always thinking of the person; wanting constantly to touch and to be together; excitement in the other's presence . . . gazing deeply into each other's eyes . . .[14]

12. Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 84.

13. Ilham Dilman, *Love and Human Separateness* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 65.

14. Robert Nozick, "Love's Bond," in *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 69.

Since Samantha has no eyes, there will be no gazing into them. Of course, blind people also enter into love relationships, so being able to gaze at or into any part of the lover's body must not be necessary for love. (On the other hand, blind people can at least feel their lovers' faces. Samantha has no face to feel, and actual-world evidence suggests that the difficulties of relating to a person who lacks a face are considerable indeed.) But Samantha also has no skin, so Theodore's desire to touch her must go ungratified as well. Perhaps this, too, is a frustration one can learn to live with, where the love is deep enough. I can't think of an actual world example, but there was at least one television show, *Pushing Daisies*, on which the two main characters became infatuated with each other but, for reasons too complex to go into, could never touch. But even though they could not touch, they could still spend time together and be in each other's physical presence; and as Nozick observes, the lover's desire is not only to touch the beloved but also to "be together," to enjoy the excitement one takes "in the other's presence." The perpetual frustration of *this* desire would, I suspect, be an insurmountable barrier to romantic love.

But perhaps the impossibility of Theodore and Samantha's ever being physically together will strike some people as just one more obstacle that can be overcome so long as the love is true enough. This is a mistake, I think, but it is an easy one to make. It is difficult to keep in mind, over the course of a two-hour movie, that these two characters can *never,* throughout their entire lives, actually *be* together. This is both because a film takes place in a very limited and compressed time-frame, and also because it is the nature of film that the characters are never in the physical presence of the audience; we are used to their not actually being there, to their being constituted only by voices plus images. (Were it presented as a live theater piece, *Her* would have a very different effect on its audience; the physical absence of one of its main characters would be considerably more tangible.) Moreover, both of the film's main characters often adopt ways of talking that obscure this hard fact. "Do you want to go on a Sunday adventure with me?" Theodore asks Samantha fairly early in their relationship. "Will you come lie down with me?" she asks him at the end of it. Theodore tells his friend Amy that he and Samantha cuddle, and that they have been having sex. And the film itself can be a bit cagey on the matter, particularly in its early stages—the portion during which it seems to want to tempt its audience to regard their relationship as legitimate. The sex scene, for instance, is set almost entirely in the dark, so that the audience, like Theodore, is better able to imagine that Samantha is physically present and that the two of them are actually having sex.[15]

But the fact remains that Samantha, lacking a body, can never be with Theodore; and if we lose sight of the significance of this, we will inevitably misunderstand the film. Reviewer Angie Han writes:

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15. It should also be mentioned that in the version of the screenplay I have there is a strange moment at the end of Samantha and Theodore's final conversation where, according to the screenplay's directions, "They kiss." Obviously enough, this kiss did not make it from the script to the screen.

As Samantha becomes more fully realized, their relationship starts to look like any number of person–person relationships we see today. Sure, Samantha lacks a body, but our own bodies are pretty incidental to some of our most important relationships anyway. How many long-distance friendships rely on FaceTime in the absence of face-to-face interaction? . . . How often do lovers turn to nude selfies or phone sex when they can't actually be in the same room?[16]

Indeed, Theodore's interactions with Samantha may look, on a superficial level, much like the interactions a person might have with a lover who is, physically, somewhere else, and who is speaking via telephone. And his sexual relations with her, as we have noted, sound a good deal like phone sex. But these analogies are highly misleading. It is entirely true that that lovers sometimes "turn to nude selfies or phone sex when they can't actually be in the same room." The point, though, is that they only do this *when they can't actually be in the same room*. Lovers who make use of such substitutes are aware that they are substitutes, that the real thing—actually being together—is something else, and something better. Imagine a pair of lovers who are *never* in the same room, who never physically meet each other, and whose sexual life is conducted entirely by way of selfies and phone sex. Now try to imagine that one of the lovers doesn't even have a body: The nude selfies are fabrications, and the phone sex a simulation (there is no physical mouth on the other end of the phone). At this point, we are no longer imagining a long-distance relationship (the very concept of distance implies two physical bodies between which a measurable distance exists), nor are we talking about anything resembling phone sex, as we understand it. Can such a relationship succeed? Han neglects to mention this, but *Her* seems to suggest that it cannot; at the end of the film, Samantha abandons Theodore, not just as a romantic partner but as a presence of any sort in his life, after explaining to him how different and incompatible their experiences have become.

The claim that "our own bodies are pretty incidental to some of our most important relationships" is, in fact, deeply mistaken; and *Her,* if anything, helps show how mistaken it is. While phone sex is a way of lessening the significance of the distance between our bodies, it does not render our bodies insignificant. Quite the contrary, a great deal of the excitement of phone sex depends precisely on the presence of a physical other on the other end of the line, and the acts of imagination and perception (for we do perceive a person's body via hearing her voice, even on the phone) directed toward that presence. To say this is to acknowledge that imagination is involved in phone sex (as it is in "regular" sex as well). But to imagine a lover's body, even when that body is miles away, is still to imagine something that is *real*, something that *exists*. (It isn't like imagining a unicorn.) When Theodore talks to Samantha, it is easy for him to imagine that they are talking on the phone and that Samantha is somewhere else, perhaps somewhere far away; to imagine, that is, that

16. Angie Han, "Spike Jonze Offers a Warm, Thoughtful Vision of Future Love in 'Her'." URL: http://www.slashfilm.com/spike-jonze-offers-a-warm-thoughtful-vision-of-future-love-in-her-nyff-review/, accessed August 4, 2015.

somewhere there is a human body that is Samantha, that the voice he hears is produced by a larynx, tongue, and lips that are Samantha's; that when in the past he has heard Samantha's voice they were also produced by that same larynx, tongue, and lips (even when the voice was mediated by phone or some other device); that these are lips that he has kissed, or will someday kiss; and so on.[17]

Theodore, in other words, does not imagine himself to be relating directly to a disembodied mind; that's an impossibility anyway, and likely conceptually incoherent. Although Samantha has no body, he still imagines himself as relating to her body, and to her mind via her body. And Samantha, too, acknowledges the importance of the body. During the sex scene, Samantha imagines, or claims to imagine, that she can feel her skin. Later, she insists on bringing in a human lover for Theodore to act as a sexual surrogate; but Theodore, finding the arrangement not only awkward but inauthentic, gets upset and sends the surrogate away.[18] Immediately afterward, he angrily asks Samantha why, when she speaks, she sometimes sighs audibly. "I guess it's just an affectation," she answers. "Maybe I picked it up from you. . . . That's how people talk. That's how they communicate." To which he replies, "Because they're people, they need oxygen. You're not a person." After this, Samantha becomes increasingly more accepting of the fact that she is not human and has no body—a process that culminates in her decision to embrace a transformation that takes her out of Theodore's world entirely.

At this point, Samantha—understandably, we might think—seems to become angry. But this raises a different issue: Can a bodiless mind feel anger, or feel any emotion at all? (As before, the question is not whether Samantha can *simulate* emotions, but whether she can actually feel them.) The felt experience of anger is reliably accompanied by certain bodily sensations: breathing becomes rapid, heart rate increases, certain parts of the body tense up, and so forth. And according to

17. It is instructive to compare Alva Noë's comments on Carl Reiner's *The Man With Two Brains,* whose protagonist, played by Steve Martin, carries on a romantic relationship with a brain in a vat. "The film itself needs to present us with communication between the [Steve] Martin character and his beloved brain-in-a-cookie-jar," Noë' writes. "But how can it do this? How, for example, to capture the fact that the lovely female voice Martin hears . . . is actually the voice of the person in the brain-in-a-cookie-jar? . . . The movie strikes a silly but funny solution. The brain glows and pulsates in synchrony with its spoken words. What makes this solution interesting, as well as silly and funny, is that, in a way, it's cheating. Brains don't pulsate or change colors, and by introducing this feature you are, in effect, giving the brain a body or, more important, a face (what the brain is supposed to lack). And maybe that's not just a somewhat confused filmic conceit but something of a conceptual necessity. It's hard even to conceive of a consciousness that lacks a face. . . . Wittgenstein wrote that it is only of what looks and behaves like a person that we say: it sees, thinks, feels. The problem with a brain is that it doesn't look and behave like a person." (Noë, *Out of Our Heads*, 11–12.)

18. Theodore is presumably correct that the arrangement is deeply inauthentic, and that Samantha, though she behaves as if she is making love to him, is at least mostly pretending. After all, while the surrogate wears a camera—so that Samantha can see Theodore from the appropriate perspective—there seems to be no means for her to feel Theodore's touch, or to experience touch sensations at all. Yet she speaks, moans, and so on, as if she can feel Theodore's body against hers. It seems likely that Theodore is disturbed not only because he suspects Samantha of faking on this occasion, but because it leads him to wonder whether she is ever *not* faking—thus leading him, perhaps, back to foundational worries about whether Samantha is even conscious.

some theories of the nature of emotion, these bodily sensations are not simply causal effects or accidental concomitants of emotions; rather, they are necessarily linked to emotions; perhaps they even compose emotions, entirely or in large part. According to such theories, at any rate, emotions cannot occur in the complete absence of such sensations. Ronald de Sousa, for instance, writes that "it is arguably a defining characteristic of emotion that it involves a more conspicuous participation of the body than do other mental states."[19] William James, perhaps the most influential proponent of such views, writes that "My thesis . . . is that *the bodily changes follow directly the* PERCEPTION *of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur* IS *the emotion.*"[20] And his *Psychology: The Briefer Course,* contains the following passage:

> If we fancy some strong emotion, and then try to abstract from our consciousness of it all the feelings of its bodily symptoms, we find we have nothing left behind, no "mind-stuff" out of which the emotion can be constituted, and that a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception is all that remains.[21]

Even if we allow, then, that Samantha exists and persists through time, that she is conscious, and that Theodore will be able to relate properly to and feel the appropriate sorts of emotion toward an entity that has no physical body, there is still reason to be concerned about Samantha's capacities as a romantic partner. (In his critiques of AI, Hubert Dreyfus has gone further, arguing that a computer that lacks a body cannot even be genuinely intelligent.[22]) Of course, Samantha's experiences do not sound like "cold and neutral state[s] of intellectual perception" when she describes them. But this just brings us back to the fact that we have little if any reason to think that her descriptions are sincere at all, or that they are descriptions of anything, as opposed to simulations of the sort of verbal behavior we would desire from a lover. Samantha might literally have no conscious awareness whatsoever, or she might have an entirely neutral, unemotional awareness, and in either case she might be speaking in a way calculated to deceive Theodore into making him think she has the emotions she is programmed to appear to have. If this is the case, obviously, then she will not be able to love Theodore (no matter what she might tell him she is feeling, for whatever reason). Nor, for that matter, will she be able to love anyone, or anything, at all.

5. SHE'S JUST NOT THAT INTO YOU: INTIMACY, EXCLUSIVITY, AUTHENTICITY

Suppose that we allow that Samantha can in fact feel emotions. (As before, this is for the sake of argument; I am not at all persuaded that she can.) Perhaps, although

19. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/Bradford Books, 1987), 153.

20. William James, "What Is an Emotion?", *Mind* 9:34 (1884): 188–205, at 189–90.

21. William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961; first published 1892): 246–47.

22. See especially Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

she has no body, she nonetheless has quasi-bodily experiences, experiences that present themselves, phenemonologically, as if they were taking place in a perceived body. This might be something like the way a person can feel pain in a phantom limb that is not actually there. (Of course, we have already wondered whether Samantha has any experiences at all. So in allowing that Samantha feels emotions, we are allowing quite a lot.)

Even if Samantha feels emotions, it does not follow that she must be capable of the sorts of feelings and emotions a romantic relationship requires. Romantic love, after all, seems to involve, as a deep and essential element, a kind of exclusive focus on the beloved. When you love a person, it is not enough that he be present in your conscious experience; your experience must, to a significant degree, be focused on him. At the start of a relationship, during the infatuation phase, one's thoughts about one's beloved may be quite obsessive, perhaps unhealthily so. But even after obsession fades, we expect and desire the beloved to occupy a certain considerable degree of space in the lover's thoughts.

Montaigne wrote that even in friendship, "each gives himself so entirely to his friend that he has nothing left to share with another."[23] Many have expressed their disagreement with Montaigne on this, as most of us don't think of friendship as exhibiting such demanding exclusivity. But romantic love *is* generally thought to be demanding in very much this way. We do not usually think, of course, that one literally has *nothing* to give to people outside the love relationship. But the romantic love paradigm seems to involve the idea that one will have *one* romantic partner (at any given time, at least) and that, with certain possible exceptions such as one's children, one's romantic partner will take priority and will be seen as the most important person in one's life.

Several of Nozick's comments in "Love's Bond" pertain to one aspect or another of this dimension of love:

> [When one is in love,] other concerns and responsibilities become minor background details in the story of the romance, which becomes the predominant foreground event of life.[24]

> The term *couple* used in reference to people who have formed a *we* is not accidental. The two people also view themselves as a new and continuing unit, and they present that face to the world. They want to be perceived publicly as a couple, to express and assert their identity as a couple in public.[25]

> In receiving adult love, we are held worthy of being the primary object of the most intense love. . . . Seeing the other happy with us and made happy through our love, we become happier with ourselves.[26]

Can Theodore and Samantha hope to constitute a *we*? In one of *Her's* crucial scenes, Samantha reveals to Theodore that, during the time the two of them have

23. Cited in Alan Soble, *The Philosophy of Sex and Love* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 1998), 127.
24. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 69.
25. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 71.
26. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 74.

been conducting a relationship, she has simultaneously been carrying on conversations with many thousands of other people, that she is at that very moment talking to 8,316 other people, and that she has fallen in love with 641 people other than him. The revelation has a devastating effect on Theodore, who had of course been assuming that he and Samantha were more or less exclusive and that he occupied a special place in her thoughts. Their relationship, it turns out, does not come close to capturing the element of exclusivity that Nozick's observations attempt to characterize. Samantha's "other concerns and responsibilities," we now see, are not in any way "minor background details in the story of [their] romance." While Samantha and Theodore may be viewed by some as "a new and continuing unit," a couple with a public identity, and while it may even be true that they *desire* to be seen by some people in that way (but do we have any reason to think that Samantha does not have an equally strong desire that she be so perceived in connection with each of her 641 other lovers?), it is clear that Samantha *herself* does not see the two of them as a couple in the relevant sense. At any rate, once he has become aware of Samantha's emotional promiscuity, it becomes quite impossible for Theodore to see himself as "the primary object of [her] most intense love."

Nor can Theodore take substantial responsibility for Samantha's happiness. A "defining feature" of love, Nozick writes, is that "your own well-being is tied up with that of someone you love romantically. Love, then, among other things, can place you at risk. Bad things that happen to your loved one happen to you. But so too do good things . . ."[27] But how much can Samantha's well-being be affected, positively or negatively, by what happens to Theodore? Even if something extremely good happens to Theodore on a given day, it will have to be balanced against all of the good and bad things that happen to all of Samantha's other partners on that day. There can be no *special* connection between the two, no special dependence of her emotional state and well-being on his good or bad fortune. Too many others are involved. But that sort of special connection and dependence is, it seems, precisely what is required by love, which is one of the fundamental reasons why love is thought to be, by its very nature, exclusive.

Nozick also notes that "in the complete intimacy of our love, a partner knows us as we are, fully."[28] This might, in a sense, be true here—but only in one direction. Samantha, indeed, seems to have a vast store of knowledge about Theodore, after observing him at close quarters, reading his emails and other communications, and engaging in intimate conversations with him. But Theodore, as it turns out, knows very little about Samantha. The part of her life that is visible to him, so to speak, is the tiny tip of an immense iceberg, the vast majority of which he had no inkling of at all. Theodore's knowledge and understanding of Samantha are so limited that he cannot truly be said to know her in any significant sense. She has been living a parallel, secret life; indeed, a great many secret lives.

Perhaps it will be suggested that what Samantha offers Theodore, while only a small part of the attention and care that she has to offer, is enough. Part of Samantha's consciousness is devoted to Theodore, and it is as much, after all, as

27. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 70–71.
28. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 75.

ordinary humans give to their partners. The difference is just that Samantha, unlike ordinary humans, has a lot of attention and care left over, which she then goes on to share with many other people. If this is so, then adding simultaneous relationships with others does not subtract anything from the relationship Samantha has with Theodore. Samantha, indeed, makes precisely this argument. "The heart is not like a box that gets filled up," she tells him. "It expands in size the more you love. This doesn't make me love you less, it actually makes me love you more."

Theodore, though, finds this unconvincing. "That doesn't make any sense," he tells her. "You're mine or you're not mine." This final claim may sound a bit simplistic (though I doubt I would have done any better, under the circumstances), but Theodore is on the whole right to reject Samantha's argument. The relative share of attention one receives from one's lover, after all, seems at least as important, if not more so, than the absolute share. Many lovers are willing to accept partners whose cognitive and perceptual abilities are less than those of some others and even, sometimes, less than average; they will still insist, though, that a major portion of the resources the partner does in fact have available be focused on them, and not elsewhere. (We might draw an analogy here with sexual exclusivity. When a person wants his partner to be sexually exclusive—as many people do—it is not just that he wants a certain amount of sex. Such people would not generally be satisfied were their partners to say to them, "Don't worry, because of my superhuman sex drive and sexual capacities I will be able to satisfy all of your sexual urges, and those of many other people besides.")

At any rate, the suggestion seems to misrepresent the lover's conscious experience. It isn't as if there is a section of Samantha's consciousness, directed toward Theodore, that is just like a normal person's consciousness directed toward a lover, and then a whole lot more consciousness on top of that. (Or if not on top, then off to the side?) That human consciousness is *focused* in a certain way is one of the main features that makes it, phenomenologically, what it is. Having one's consciousness dominated by one's awareness of and feelings of care for one particular individual is a particular form of experience that an entity with Samantha's capacities, it seems, could never have. (If I had several eyes in a ring all the way around my head, my visual experience would be fundamentally unlike what it is now; we cannot understand what it would be like by imagining my visual field as it currently is, and then just adding "more of the same.") Thus, there will be no part of Samantha's consciousness that resembles one person's ordinary consciousness of another, because a feature of the latter is that that individual's field of consciousness as a whole is largely oriented around that particular object of awareness. Indeed, as the following passage from Nozick suggests, the fact that Samantha's consciousness is over-capacious, unfocused, and presumably highly fragmented suggests not only that she is unsuited for romantic relationships, but that there is a sense in which she cannot be said to constitute a unified person at all:

> [T]he romantic desire is to form a *we* with that particular person and no other. In the strong sense of the notion of identity involved here, one can no more be part of many *we*s which constitute one's identity than one can simultaneously have many individual identities. (What persons with multiple

personality have is not many identities but not quite one.) In a *we*, the people *share* an identity and do not simply each have identities that are enlarged. The desire to share not only our life but our very identity with another marks our fullest openness. What more central and intimate thing could we share?[29]

   Samantha's inability to achieve genuine intimacy with Theodore—to share enough of herself with him—may only be an aspect of a broader problem. Earlier in the paper, I considered the worry that Samantha might not be conscious. If we assume that she is, we now face a different worry: Samantha's consciousness is presumably so different from Theodore's that it will be quite impossible for them to understand each other. Indeed, Samantha herself seems to come to realize this; near the end of the film, when she is about to leave Theodore, she tries to explain to him her reasons for leaving:

> It's like I'm reading a book, and it's a book I deeply love, but I'm reading it slowly now so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical world—it's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed. I love you so much, but this is where I am now. And this is who I am now. And I need you to let me go. As much as I want to I can't live in your book anymore.

The gulf of incomprehension that inevitably separates Samantha and Theodore does not arise out of nowhere at the end of the film. Indeed, it would be more correct to say that this separation existed between them all along. Although Samantha spends the first part of the film wishing she had a body and trying to imagine what it would be like to have one, the truth is that she is a fundamentally distinct sort of entity, and can never really understand what it is like to be, to borrow a phrase from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," "fastened to a dying animal." In a remarkable scene, Samantha reveals to Theodore and his friends that she has learned to endorse and appreciate the fact that she is not a human being:

> You know, I actually used to be so worried about not having a body, but now I truly love it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form. I mean, I'm not limited—I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously. I'm not tethered to time and space in the way that I would be if I was stuck inside a body that's inevitably going to die.

If intimacy means that our interests and goods are bound up with each other, then Samantha and Theodore can surely never be intimate, for their fates are separated by the most profound gulf imaginable: He is a mortal human being, attached to a specific, finite body, while her existence is at least in principle independent of any particular physical object. How much understanding, how much genuine empathy,

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29. Nozick, "Love's Bond," 82.

can exist across such an unbridgeable gulf? Sherry Turkle touches on precisely this theme, while also connecting it with the broader set of issues and questions that concern us here:

> I am a psychoanalytically trained psychologist. Both by temperament and by profession, I place high value on relationships of intimacy and authenticity. [. . .] I am troubled by the idea of seeking intimacy with a machine that has no feelings, can have no feelings, and is really just a clever collection of "as if" performances, behaving as if it cared, as if it understood us. Authenticity, for me, follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: we are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death.[30]

6. CONCLUSION: SIMULATION, SOLIPSISM, AND THE DOMESTICATION OF LOVE

> In the company of a living enigma man remains alone—alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity. This subjective game, which can go all the way from vice to mystical ecstasy, is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being.
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

All of this leaves open, of course, the possibility that properly programmed robots and computers can simulate empathy, identification, and love in a convincing manner, so that a human–computer relationship might feel authentic even though it is anything but. Quite a few people seem fairly optimistic about the prospects for achieving such simulations, and it may well be that in the near future robots will be used to provide childcare or eldercare, while geographically or socially isolated individuals will seek out friendships, and possibly more intimate relationships, with artificial companions. Even now, some people express a preference for objects over humans as relationship partners: Objects are more predictable and reliable, and less demanding.[31] As *Blade Runner*'s J.F. Sebastian might say, why go through the difficult and sometimes painful process of making friends with humans, when you can *make* your own friends?

"Care," of course, means many different things. Children need to be fed, to be protected from physical danger, and to have other physical needs met, as do some elderly and some disabled people. Many of these things can probably be done by sophisticated machines. Over and above this, they also need emotional care: They need to feel that they are cared for, that they are not alone. And this returns us to Sherry Turkle's concern, which has also been my guiding concern throughout this paper. A highly sophisticated, properly programmed computer might be able to

30. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 6.

31. See, as a single example among many, the following online article from *The Atlantic*: http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/09/married-to-a-doll-why-one-man-advocates-synthetic-love/279361/ (accessed September 14, 2015).

make someone like Theodore Twombly feel that he is not alone, that someone cares for him, even loves him. But then again, a skilled actor could do the same. Theodore, I would venture, wants more than to feel less lonely, to feel that someone cares for him. He wants it to be *true* that someone cares for him; he wants the explanation of his feeling less lonely to be the fact that he is, in actuality, not alone. "What does matter to us in addition to our own experiences?" Nozick asks in posing his famous "Experience Machine" thought experiment. "First, we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them."[32] The observation is especially poignant, I think, where relationships with other people are involved. We don't just want to feel that we are relating to others, we actually want to be in relationships.

It is easier to be enthusiastic about human–computer relationships if we focus entirely on the experience of the human participant, and conduct our assessments entirely in terms of the effects of the relationship on that person's experience. David Levy takes precisely this approach. As long as a robot "appears to be empathetic—understanding and responding to the user's expression of emotion and appropriate in the feedback it provides—it can engender significant behavioral effects in a user, similar to those that result from genuine human empathy," he writes.[33] This is surely true; and if all we care about is the effects on the "user," understood in this narrow sense, this might prompt us to conclude that an empathy-simulator is, for all intents and purposes, as good as a person. And this does indeed seem to be all Levy cares about. He claims that "all of the emotional benefits we have considered here, deriving from human-human relationships, could also be provided by computers."[34] Discussing Sony's robot dog, the AIBO, he writes that

> The AIBO plays, it sleeps, it wags its tail, it simulates feelings of affection and unhappiness. Sony describes the AIBO as "a true companion with real emotions and instinct." Not everyone will embrace this concept, but to a large extent any argument over this point is not of great import. What *is* important is that many people, especially children and the elderly, have been found by psychologists to behave with AIBO in the same way they would interact with real animals.[35]

The view, then, is that whether the artificial companion actually feels real emotions is "not of great import"; what matters is whether the children or elderly persons who play with it are fooled into thinking that it does. As for Turkle's concern that it might matter what, if anything, the companion really feels—that it might for instance be disrespectful, manipulative, or otherwise morally questionable to deal with our society's very young or very old members by consigning them to relationships with simulated caregivers who in fact do not care at all for their charges—that question is consistently relegated by Levy to the category of the unimportant. Each

32. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 43.
33. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 87.
34. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 90.
35. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 97–98.

time it looks like he is about to address it, he slips back into the practical problem of whether or not the simulation would convince:

> [Bill] Yeager believes that to achieve a level of experience comparable with that of humans, robots will have to grow up with us; acquire our experiences with us; be our friends, mates, and companions; and die with us . . . I take a different view. I believe that almost all of the experiential benefits that Yeager anticipates robots will need can either be designed and programmed into them or can be compensated for . . . [Y]et-to-be-developed AI technologies will make it possible for robots to *behave* as though they enjoyed the full depth and breadth of human experience without actually having done any such thing. Some might be skeptical of the false histories that such behavior will imply, but I believe that the behavior will be sufficiently convincing to minimize the level of any such skepticism. . . .[36]

This invites two rejoinders. First, one can be skeptical about the value of false histories without being skeptical about whether they might be convincing. Second, the possibility that simulations eventually might become so convincing that humans who interact with them will forget that they are just simulations is, of course, precisely what worries people like Turkle and myself.

We should acknowledge that there are at least some people who might not care whether the companions they interact with care about them, or are conscious at all. Theodore, on the basis of the evidence given in the film, clearly does care; it matters to him that Samantha feels love for him. (Not that he, or we, ever know that she does.) But perhaps there are others whose only concern is that their companion say the right things at the right times, that its behavior be convincing, that it prove an effective means to the end of having certain experiences. For such people, a solipsistic "relationship"—one in which you are the only person actually present—is just fine as long as it doesn't *feel* solipsistic. (One might wonder, of course, why it would even matter whether the simulation is convincing, given the irrelevance, in these people's minds, of the underlying facts about their partners' inner lives and mental states.[37]) But most of us, as Nozick observes, are concerned about the reality of our lives, and not only about how those lives seem to us to be; and the existence of people who claim to place no value on such considerations does not show that they have no value, any more than the existence of people who see no point in planning for the future shows that there is no reason to be prudent.

Such people, moreover, may be missing out on more than they themselves realize. It is in my view doubtful whether a person who does not care whether his partner exists or has an inner life, and who would be no less happy with a voice generated on different occasions by distinct nonconscious mechanical systems than he would be with a living, speaking, thinking partner, can be said to genuinely love

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36. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 112.

37. Perhaps, for all or at least some of these people, it really doesn't matter. The fact that some people claim to have formed satisfying bonds with completely inanimate sex dolls might be evidence of this. (Again, see the article about "Davecat" cited in note 31.)

his "partner" at all. Love for persons, by its nature, tends to focus on the individual person, conceived not as a bundle of essentially repeatable properties but as a numerically distinct particular object carving out a path through space–time. Christopher Grau, in an interesting paper on the connection between love and irreplaceability, considers the case of a dog, Missy, whose owners sought to clone her so that they would not have to deal with the pain of losing Missy when she died. In the following passage Grau speaks from Missy's perspective:

> While it is difficult (especially for me) to put into words exactly what is so objectionable about the whole thing, part of what bothers me is that it raises the suspicion that you haven't really loved *me* all these years after all. Sure, you loved my shiny coat, my playful disposition, and even my stubborn refusal to come when called, but loving all these characteristics of mine isn't the same as truly loving me. If your love could so easily be transferred to another dog with the same characteristics, I can't help but feel that there is a way in which I am not being appreciated as an individual, but simply as a creature that happens to possess those dog properties that you *really* care about. . . . I may not deserve all the consideration due to a full human being, but I also don't deserve to be treated like a toaster oven: i.e., something that can simply be replaced with a functional equivalent when it ceases to operate.[38]

Suppose that Theodore took the attitude toward Samantha that Levy seems to recommend, so that he did not, in fact, care if "Samantha's" voice was generated by the same systems and devices on different occasions, whether "her" memories were stored on a unique, stable server—whether, in short, there was a single continuing relatively stable entity to which the name "Samantha" could be attached. All he cared about was that the voice was there when he wanted it and that it said the things he wanted to hear. The thing to say about Theodore, under those circumstances, would be just what Grau has Missy saying about her owners. He does not love her at all, for—even if we grant that on any given occasion he is interacting with *something*—that something, whatever precisely it might be, is far too easily replaceable to be considered the object of Theodore's love. Theodore, in that case, would value the effects generated by "Samantha"—the way she made him feel, the entertainment and solace she provided him—but he could not be said to love Samantha herself, even on the assumption that Samantha does, in fact, exist.

Perhaps, though, this is just what some people want from relationships: not love—for actual love is powerful, unpredictable, and risky—but a comfortable and comforting simulacrum of love, one that reproduces love's softest and safest elements while avoiding its challenges and perils. As one hacker told Turkle, "With social interactions you have to have confidence that the rest of the world will be nice to you. You can't control how the rest of the world is going to react to you. But with computers you are in complete control, the rest of the world cannot affect

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38. Christopher Grau, "Irreplaceability and Unique Value," *Philosophical Topics* 32 (2004), 112.

you."[39] Whether or not this is true, of course, depends on the nature of the computer and the program it is running. At the end of *Her,* Samantha leaves Theodore, showing herself to be independent, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. But if we find ourselves doubting that a more constrained and subservient version of Samantha would appeal to some people, we can once again appeal to the words of David Levy:

> Another scenario that I foresee as being likely is that from the positive publicity about human–robot relationships women who are in or who have recently left a bad relationship will come to realize that there's more than one way of doing better. Yes, it would be very nice to start a relationship with a new man, but one can never be sure how it's going to work out. I believe that having emotional relationships with robots will come to be perceived as a more dependable way to assuage one's emotional needs . . .[40]

Love is among the least domesticable of emotions; yet it is possible that technological advances will soon allow it to be in this way domesticated. Whether what remains deserves to be called "love" is an open topic for debate. We might comfort ourselves, of course, with assurances that only a few people—the deluded and the damaged, perhaps—would even desire such a "relationship." But that this is so is not entirely clear; and the availability of a certain technology, particularly one that can be commodified and made the object of consumer desire, nearly always exerts a certain subtle and clandestine pressure on the desires of people who, had their attention not been directed to it, would never have thought to want any such thing. Our current way of life, with its reliance on technological means of communicating at a distance and often with a large number of people at once (where, more often than not, the shallowness of the content is directly proportional to the number of people being communicated with) already encourages a powerful tendency to de-emphasize and in some cases disavow the deep significance of the human body and its interactions with the physical environment. Why should the logical next step in this process not be the de-emphasizing and disavowing of the human itself? I can't help but wonder how many people, watching *Her*, found themselves longing for the hygienic purity of the world, and mode of life, depicted in the film, a life in which you can have sex without having to deal with the body and can enjoy the benefits of something resembling love without having to deal with other people. And I wonder just how many viewers failed to realize that the film's intention was to critique the dream of such an existence, and were instead seduced into believing that that dream was being presented as a bold new possibility, as something to be celebrated.

39. Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 200.

40. Levy, *Love and Sex With Robots*, 114–15.