Seduced by the Machine: Human-Technology Relations and Sociable Robots

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What happens when our object world starts talking back to us and engaging us emotionally and relationally? How ought we to respond to the growing recognition that our social lives are increasingly mediated by technical artifacts and that the boundary between user and artifact, human and thing, is disappearing? In order to get a handle on these key questions for the 21st century, I’d like to begin by looking back to a watershed moment in the history of human-technology relations.

This particular moment takes place in 2046 on an asteroid nine million miles from Earth where convicted criminal James A. Corry is in his fourth year of a 50-year sentence of solitary confinement, and he is lonely. Profoundly lonely. And he can’t take it anymore. The captain of a supply ship, Allenby, has tried to alleviate Corry’s loneliness by bringing him books, playing cards, the parts to an antique automobile, but these have provided only temporary solace. He still feels “a sobbing hunger for someone of his own kind. A shaky, pulsating yearning to hear a voice other than his own.” Indeed, he fears becoming an inanimate object akin to his antique automobile: “…but maybe I’ll become like that car. Inanimate. Just an item sitting in the sand—and then would I feel loneliness?” (Serling 1961).

But then on one supply run Allenby secretly brings him something entirely different: Alicia, a robot built in the form of a woman. The manual that accompanies Alicia states that “physiologically and psychologically she is a human being with a set of emotions and a memory
track. The ability to reason, to think and to speak” (Serling 1959). Initially Corry is repulsed by Alicia and feels revulsion at this thing, exclaiming that he doesn’t need a machine, comparing her to his antique automobile: “You’re just like this heap. A hunk of metal with arms and legs instead of wheels. But this heap doesn’t mock me the way you do. It doesn’t look at me with make-believe eyes or talk to me with make-believe voice” (Serling 1959). Over the first few days in Alicia’s presence, Corry finds himself staring at her a lot, “but it was not the inventory of interest that a man uses to look at a woman. It was a clinical examination of a foreign object” (Serling 1961).

Finally, in a heated exchange with Alicia, Corry roughly rejects her, throws her to the ground, and is seemingly intent upon striking her. Whereupon she cries and exclaims that she can feel loneliness too. Alicia at this moment steps out of the category of thing or object and becomes a relational artifact, a more engaging and engaged artifact than Corry’s antique automobile has ever been. Overcome, Corry reaches out to Alicia, beginning a strange relationship with her that lasts eleven months. As he notes in his journal, “It’s difficult to write down what has been the sum total of this very strange and bizarre relationship. Is it man and woman, or man and machine? I don’t really know myself….I’m not lonely anymore. Each day can now be lived with. I love Alicia. Nothing else matters” (Serling 1959). The story takes a dark turn, though, when Allenby returns with news of Corry’s pardon. Corry’s to be brought home but he can only take 14 pounds back with him aboard the spaceship. When Corry refuses to abandon Alicia, Allenby shoots her/it in the face and as Alicia crumples to the ground Corry is shocked to see the wires and vacuum tubes now exposed behind her shot-off face. And thus the debate over relational artifacts, once endearingly broached, is brought to a violent conclusion. The camera pans up into the starry sky and we hear the dulcet tones of Rod Serling:
Down below, on a microscopic piece of sand that floats through space, is a fragment of a man’s life. Left to rust is the place he lived in and the machines he used. Without use they will disintegrate from the wind and sand and the years that act upon them. All of Mr. Corry’s machines…including the one made in his image, kept alive by love, but now…obsolete…in the Twilight Zone. (Serling 1959)

**Relational Artifacts and Technological Mediation**

This watershed moment in human-technology relations doesn’t actually take place in 2046 but in November, 1959, courtesy of that great pop culture philosophy and science fiction show *The Twilight Zone*, in an episode entitled “The Lonely.” What warrants “The Lonely” as a watershed moment? First, its prescience. Already in 1959 *The Twilight Zone* recognizes that in an advanced technological age we human beings, facing the existential crisis of our loneliness and solitude, will turn not to one another but to our technical artifacts for solace. Some five years later, in what may be the next watershed moment of human-technology relations, the computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum will create the first real relational artifact, the computer psychotherapist ELIZA and, like Corry initially, he will be repulsed by the willingness of his undergraduates to sit for long periods of time and tell ELIZA the most intimate details of their lives. Alicia and ELIZA were the vanguard of relational artifacts and sociable robots that by the turn of the century became a virtual tsunami of Furbies, Aibos, Tamagotchis, and robots such as Cog, Kismet, BINA48, and even a Japanese therapeutic robotic seal named Paro.

These are all examples of what Sherry Turkle has defined as relational artifacts, technologies that have states of mind and where encounters with them are enriched through
understanding these inner states (Turkle 2006). Relational artifacts are machines that display behaviors that make people feel as though they are dealing with sentient creatures that care about their presence, relational robots built with psychologies and needs of their own. As Turkle notes, they call forth the human desire for communication, connection, and nurturance, much as Alicia did when she begins to cry and claims to be lonely.

“The Lonely” also deserves its status as a watershed moment for enacting a debate over the status of such relational artifacts, a debate that still resonates more than fifty years later. Behind the conflict between Corry, with his love for Alicia and his lack of concern over whether she is a woman or a machine, and Allenby, who is willing to engage in violence to prove his point that Alicia is a mere thing, is a fundamental conflict over how to understand the role of relational artifacts in our lives, a conflict that if anything is more pointed today. On the one hand, Alicia and the growing wave of sociable robots and relational artifacts we’ve since witnessed may presage a society in which the authentically human has been replaced by simulations, in which our closest ties are to machines rather than other human beings, our loneliness is assuaged not by the company of others but by robot companions, and our sovereignty and autonomy over technology disappear. On the other hand, Alicia and her brethren may be the vanguard of a new way of thinking about human-technology relations, in which the boundaries between the two are made more permeable and we recognize that congress with technology is an inherently human trait to be affirmed rather than denied. We see this same debate played out both in popular culture, especially in films ranging from Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 (1968) to Steven Spielberg’s A.I. (2001) and Jake Schreier’s Robot & Frank (2012), as well as on the pages of magazines such as The New Yorker and leading newspapers such as The New York Times, which has been exploring these issues in a series called “Smarter Than You Think.” As Amy Harmon noted in an
article for the series on the use of Paro in nursing homes, these devices are “adding fuel to science fiction fantasies of machines that people can relate to as well as rely on. And they are adding a personal dimension to a debate over what human responsibilities machines should, and should not, be allowed to undertake” (Harmon 2010).

It is this debate that I would like to explore in this essay, using relational artifacts as a prism to critically examine current scholarship on human-technology relations and efforts to rethink the subject-object divide and the manner in which our human, or post-human, lives are increasingly mediated by technology. In her recent book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle argues that relational artifacts such as Alicia and Paro point to a crisis in authenticity and a willingness in society to relegate its more marginal members, especially the elderly, to the status of objects or things. Building on the work of Bruno Latour and Don Ihde, among others, contemporary Dutch philosophers of technology Peter Paul Verbeek and Mark Coeckelbergh counter that such views are predicated on an outmoded modernist metaphysics that insists on the separation of subjects from objects, humans from technology, and that once we recognize how fundamentally mediated by technology human lives are, we’ll be less preoccupied by such crises of authenticity and more willing to shape our existence in light of technical mediation. Building on these initial reflections on “The Lonely,” I will argue that while there are virtues in both perspectives, we still lack a comprehensive enough framework in which to understand and evaluate the complexities of human-technology relations. Developing such a framework will ultimately require a clearer view of both human beings and technology and how both are situated within a human community constituted by caring relations. In the concluding section of this essay, I suggest that we can discern the outlines of such a framework in feminist ethicists’ emphasis on a relational ontology that begins not with human –
technology relations but with human relations in which technology clearly plays a significant but not necessarily foundational role. I begin, though, by turning to the recent work of Sherry Turkle.

**Sherry Turkle’s Second Thoughts**

Over the past thirty years, Sherry Turkle has been studying computers and the culture surrounding them and writing largely approvingly of developments in human-technology relations. Especially in *Computers and the Second Self* and *Life on the Screen*, Turkle has both documented fundamental shifts in our thinking about and relating to technology and celebrated the emergence of more decentered and flexible notions of mind, self, and society. Early on, Turkle also recognized the power of evocative objects and material culture and has maintained a focus on things throughout her career. As she noted in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, “We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity. Yet only recently have objects begun to receive the attention they deserve” (Turkle 2007, 6).

With the emergence of social networking and relational artifacts, however, and the shift from what she refers to as technologies as projection screens to technologies of engagement, Turkle seems to be having second thoughts about objects and her assessment of the computer culture has turned more critical. In her latest book, *Alone Together*, as well as in a series of essays on relational artifacts, Turkle argues that we are facing a crisis of authenticity, brought on by our increasing engagement with relational artifacts that simulate human emotions and attachment and offer an easy alternative to engaging with actual human beings.
Why the change of heart? Turkle argues that we are witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm in computation in which the previous focus on creating intelligent machines has been replaced by a focus on designing machines that exploit human vulnerabilities and engage us socially and emotionally. This new emphasis on affective computing puts a premium not on creating machines that are actually intelligent but machines that perform as if they had emotions and a mental life and desire care and nurturance. Turkle suggests that we have moved from computers as neutral tools to think with, evocative objects that serve as a mirror onto which we can project, to objects that serve as relational entities that provoke engagement. This new paradigm challenges the boundary between user and object, human being and technology, and seduces human users in a way that Turkle finds transgressive and forbidding. “Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology” (Turkle 2011, 16).

Turkle is clear that relational artifacts only offer the simulation of companionship. They don’t actually feel emotions nor do they care about us. They are mere objects, not subjects, and we cannot forge authentic relationships with them. And yet we actively resist efforts to demystify our relations with such robotic companions. In one study conducted by Turkle and her colleagues, she introduces children to robotic companions, who they almost instinctively begin to treat as playmates. She then “pulls back the curtain,” so to speak, showing the children the machine behind the robotic magic. Turkle is almost scandalized by the children’s resistance to having their relationship with their robotic companions demystified. With few exceptions, children were uninterested, indeed unwilling, to approach the robots in terms of underlying mechanism. As she notes, “our didactic presentation of a transparent, mechanical Cog had almost no effect either on children’s attitudes toward the robot or on their feelings of being in a
relationship with it. Understanding the mystery behind the machine was irrelevant to their concerns.” We find it hard to resist these objects, even when they have been “de-mystified” (Turkle et al. 2006, 326).

How does Turkle account for our capacity to be so easily seduced by such machines? She cites three elements: (1) our Darwinian buttons; (2) human vulnerabilities; and (3) a computer culture built on the shifting sands of simulation. Turkle argues that “we see robots as close to human if they do such things as make eye contact, track our motions, and gesture in a show of friendship. These appear to be ‘Darwinian buttons’ that cause people to imagine that the robot is an ‘other,’ that there is, colloquially speaking, ‘somebody home’” (Turkle 2011, 8). Turkle further argues that these objects are proliferating at a time when we human beings are suffering from a “certain fatigue with the difficulties of dealing with people” (Turkle 2010, 7) and they offer the illusion of relationship without the demands. “One can be a loner yet never alone,” as she notes (Turkle 2010, 8). Again, “the seductions of the robotic provide a window onto how much people are tempted to sidestep encounters with friends and family” (Turkle 2010, 7). When these Darwinian buttons are being pushed in a context where we are especially vulnerable, where the number and quality of human relationships has deteriorated, we are especially prone to anthropomorphize relational artifacts and engage with them in a simulated dance of relationship.

Turkle is equally concerned that our ready acceptance of relational artifacts as substitutes for genuine human relationships in turn further convinces us that there is little difference between genuine and simulated emotional responses. In a computer culture predicated upon the power of simulation, our connection to reality has grown so tenuous that we no longer value real human emotional responses and we are inclined to see other people’s behaviors as a matter of simulation. We are unable today to even differentiate between authentic and simulated
engagement and emotions. Indeed, Turkle is concerned that we are witnessing a generational shift and that as our world is increasingly designed to foster mediation via relational artifacts we will see a whole new way of approaching some fundamentals of being human. Our congress with machines will, she argues, change the norm for how we understand intimacy and companionship and it will make it more difficult for us to engage meaningfully with others (Turkle 2011). We will increasingly come to interpret human behavior in terms of the same tricks and simulations that machines use. We will no longer privilege authentic emotions as emotional authenticity becomes a matter of mere performance. As she asks rhetorically, “Are we ready to see ourselves in the mirror of the machine and to see love as our performances of love?” (Turkle 2011, 131)

Ultimately, Turkle’s change of heart regarding these computational objects is predicated on what she sees as radically different philosophical assumptions embedded in this technology, assumptions regarding the human condition and questions about human uniqueness and specialness. What do these relational artifacts presage for our conception of our self and our sense of place in the world? “The questions raised by relational artifacts speak to people’s longstanding fears and hopes about technology, and to the question of what is special about being human, what is the nature of ‘personhood.’” (Turkle 2002, 137)

Peter-Paul Verbeek and Technological Mediation

There are a number of aspects of Turkle’s critique of relational artifacts that I find interesting. For now, though, I would like to focus on one specific aspect and note that the arc of development in Turkle’s standpoint regarding human-technology relations, from a largely celebratory account of the manner in which the borders and boundaries between human and machine are disappearing to a more critical standpoint in which she fears undermining human
authenticity and uniqueness, is almost exactly opposite the path taken in recent philosophy of
technology, whose arc of development has been quite different.

Early philosophers of technology such as Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers were very critical of technology and sought to clearly demarcate the boundaries between humanity and technology. Technology threatens dehumanization and its limits must be closely circumscribed. In more recent philosophy of technology, however, there is a growing critical awareness of the weakness of this analysis and an effort to tear down the boundaries between human being and technology. One sees this most clearly in the interest paid to technological mediation in the work of Bruno Latour, Don Ihde, and the Dutch philosophers of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek and Mark Coeckelbergh. As it is Verbeek who offers the most fully developed philosophical of technological mediation, I will focus primarily on his view.

Verbeek argues that much of philosophy of technology is still held captive by a modernist metaphysics that insists on the separation of subjects from objects, humans from artifacts, and portrays technology as a largely external, negative, dehumanizing force. Drawing on Latour’s actor-network theory and Ihde’s post-phenomenology, Verbeek argues that “we must give up the idea that we exercise a sovereign authority over technology and that we employ technologies merely as neutral means towards ends that have been autonomously determined. The truth is that we are profoundly technologically mediated beings.” (Verbeek 2009, 9)

From Verbeek’s perspective, Turkle’s emphasis on authenticity and the essentially human, her reference to Darwinian buttons, and her efforts to demystify the nature of relational artifacts, are an effort to reinforce our sovereignty and autonomy. She is trying to unmask technology and safeguard the modern autonomous subject. Turkle persists in approaching technology through a modernist framework predicated on a fundamental distinction between
subjects and objects. Drawing for inspiration on Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, Verbeek argues that we must question our usual distinctions between subjects as active and having intentionality and freedom, and objects as lifeless, passively serving as the projections or instruments of human intentions (Verbeek 2009).

This mistaken metaphysics makes it “impossible to properly discern the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of subject and object—of humankind and technology.” We must, Verbeek argues, shape our existence in relation to technology. “In our technological culture, humans and technologies do not have a separate existence anymore, but help too shape each other in myriad ways” (Verbeek 2006, 4). Technology fundamentally mediates what kind of humans we are.

Verbeek argues that technologies co-shape the appearance of the world, they structure and organize the world, and human beings are fundamentally interwoven with technology. Technology and the human being are not two fundamentally distinct spheres in which the human being is or ought to be sovereign over technology. Rather they are inextricably interwoven with one another: “There is an interplay between humans and technologies within which neither technological development nor humans has autonomy. Humankind is a product of technology, just as technology is a product of humankind” (Verbeek 2009, 10).

Like Verbeek, Coeckelbergh emphasizes the centrality of human-technology relations and argues that technologies are not a mere means but are part of a “technoanthropological whole.” As he states, “Our lives are already interwoven with technologies. They are not just tools we use to attain our goals; they are part of the social and existential fabric from which we emerge as individuals and selves in the first place” (Coeckelbergh 2012a, 58). Beginning from the standpoint of human-technology relations, Coeckelbergh argues that we need to get away from
an emphasis on authenticity and recognize that technology will indeed change our goals and what we consider to be important. In “How I Learned to Love the Robot,” Coeckelbergh specifically addresses using robots for elderly care and argues that we need to dispense with the authenticity conditions for emotional relations and recognize that what we mean by friendship and care is likely to change under the influence of the very technologies Turkle is reacting against (Coeckelbergh 2012b).

Verbeek too suggests that we develop an alternative normative vision to Turkle’s rejection of relational artifacts. We should recognize the engaging nature of technology and its meditational and relational nature, and then trust ourselves to it, co-constituting ourselves in that relationship. Our ethical stance toward technology cannot be predicated upon a notion of risk, the purity of the human, or the threat that technology poses to humanity. We must trust ourselves to technology and give shape to the relationship between people and technology rather than portray that relationship as a threat or a lie, a simulation that undermines the authentically human. Our ethics must be a co-production of subject and object in which we practice a technological ascesis: “In our culture, technology is one of the most important powers that help shape subjectivity. Technological ascesis consists in using technology, but in a deliberate and responsible way, such that the self that results from it—including its relations to other people—acquires a desirable shape” (Verbeek 2006, 22). The central question of such a technological ascesis becomes what do we want to make of human beings?

Human Relations and Our Technological Others
Let us return once more to that windswept asteroid, to Corry’s loneliness, and to the ministrations of that early exemplar of a relational artifact Alicia. As Allenby returns to the asteroid ready to bring Corry back to Earth, he is appalled to discover that Corry has bonded with Alicia and her very existence now threatens all of their return. As Allenby says to Corry: “Corry, I saw this…this thing get crated and shoved into a box” (Serling 1961, 25). But Corry is equally adamant. “It was incredible to him that they didn’t understand. It was beyond belief that they didn’t perceive what surely must be such an evident truth. You couldn’t leave a beautiful woman alone on an asteroid” (Serling 1961, 25).

The dispute between Corry and Allenby has to do with the status of things and their relation to our humanity, to the human condition. On this point, Turkle and Verbeek seem to agree. Despite their differences, both recognize what we might think of as the turn to the material world in contemporary theory, a recognition that things are not simply passive and inert but are relationally involved in constituting the human world. Both recognize as well that this possible shift toward the material world of things raises important questions about what it means to be human and our place in the world. As Turkle notes,

In my view, decisions about the role of robots in the lives of children and seniors cannot turn simply on whether children and the elderly “like” the robots. What does this deployment of nurturing technology at the two most dependent moments of the life cycle say about us? What will it do to us? What kinds of relationships are appropriate to have with machines? And what is a relationship? (Turkle 2006)

Verbeek is equally clear that moralizing the material world requires a new metaphysical view of the human condition, one in which technology takes a central place. It is at this point, though, that Turkle and Verbeek clearly part paths. Recall that when he is initially confronted
with Alicia, Corry throws her to the ground, comparing her to his antique automobile, arguing that she is a lie, a simulation, not authentically human, unwittingly adopting Turkle’s modernist metaphysics and discourse of authenticity. Alicia, though, engagingly plays on his human vulnerabilities and his desire for companionship and he is ultimately taken in by this simulation. Or is it rather that Corry comes to realize that his life is already inextricably intertwined with technology and that Alicia is simply the most recent and most obvious indication of this? After all, he’s imprisoned for causing a death following an automobile accident. His prison is an arid and desiccated asteroid nine million miles from Earth. His imprisonment is aided and abetted by a rocket ship that brings him daily rations and an antique automobile that helps him pass the time. He enjoys neither autonomy nor sovereignty. Perhaps his life is simply a metaphor for human-technology relations. Why not fall in love with a robotic companion and simply complete the circle?

We’re left with something of a quandary then, made more difficult by the worthwhile insights of both Verbeek and Turkle, as well as the weaknesses in their views. From the perspective of Verbeek’s philosophy of technological mediation, Turkle’s perspective, especially on technology, seems somewhat inconsistent and poorly developed, if not naïve. Turkle’s claim that previous computational paradigms presented us with computers as neutral screens, mere objects to think with, is at odds with both contemporary philosophy of technology, which has soundly rejected this instrumental view of technology, as well as her own earlier explorations of the manner in which technology has shaped and mediated human existence. Turkle herself freely employs metaphors such as “psychologically programmed” and “the hardwiring of evolution” and together with her earlier explorations of how culture has been shaped and transformed by
computers this is indicative of the powerful ways in which our lives are indeed mediated by technology.

We get a sense of the ambivalence in Turkle’s thought in her reflections on the interactions of one of her subjects, Rich, with the sociable robot Kismet:

When Kismet lowers its eyes, suddenly “shy,” Rich does not want to let go. We are at a moment of more. Who is leading and who is following in this dance? As in a moment of romantic encounter, one loses track and discovers a new rhythm where it doesn’t matter; each animates and reanimates the other. Rich senses that he has lost control in a way that pleases him. (Turkle 2011, 187)

Turkle speaks of losing control but also wants to clearly delineate between who is leading and who is following in this dance. And yet if our relationship with technology is characterized as a dance, then perhaps, following Verbeek, we ought to recognize that it is no longer legitimate to insist on asking who is leading. Turkle’s insistence that we do so, even when confronted by her subject’s pleasure in losing control, can sometimes come across as naïve and old-fashioned, as she herself recognizes. “…if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family and friends—sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way” (Turkle 2011, xl). Elsewhere, Turkle suggests that having envisaged our lives with technology, the times “have brought us back to such homilies” (Turkle 2011, 472). One has to wonder, though, whether old-fashioned homilies are a sufficient response to our complexly technologically mediated lives. Old-fashioned games of Scrabble may have been nice, but Turkle
risks idealizing the past while foreclosing upon whatever possible future pleasures may come from our “dancing” with technology.

This is not to suggest, though, that Turkle doesn’t have legitimate reasons for concern, reasons that are sometimes missing from Verbeek’s and Coeckelbergh’s analyses. Consider Corry’s predicament once more. He’s been imprisoned in solitary confinement on an asteroid millions of miles from home. He fears becoming an object himself, an inanimate thing sitting in the sand. He’s part of a culture that is both willing to objectify him as well as build and box up robotic companions for mass consumption. There’s much we are not told about Alicia, including especially what has led a society to manufacture and sell these sociable robots. And it’s precisely this last point that Turkle may pick up on. We ought not to forget the cultural and institutional context in which Corry’s loneliness was produced. Alicia is the product of a culture that has chosen to maroon its subjects on a lonely asteroid in a cruel sci-fi vision of solitary confinement and then devise a technical fix for that loneliness by supplying them with robotic companions.

Here The Twilight Zone remains alert to something that is mostly absent from Verbeek’s analysis: the cultural and institutional factors that shape the need for relational artifacts. It is precisely this recognition that drives Turkle’s concern over relational artifacts, the fact that many of these relational artifacts are being deployed in contexts where the most vulnerable segments of society, the very young and the very old, are being entrusted to technology. In this regard, Turkle might turn around the earlier charge and claim that celebrations of human-technology relations are naïve. After all, the emphasis in these accounts of technological mediation is almost exclusively on the technology. While Verbeek’s account celebrates human-technology relations, he also emphasizes the fundamental role played by technology in that relation. We are, he suggests, profoundly technologically mediated beings. Technology fundamentally mediates what
kind of human beings we are. Human existence, Coeckelbergh suggests, is a human-technological existence, part of a technoanthropological whole. “In our culture,” Verbeek notes, “technology is one of the most important powers that help shape subjectivity” (Verbeek 2006, 22). But actual human beings using technology seldom appear in either Verbeek’s or Coeckelbergh’s analyses and when they do they are usually adult rational human beings and male. And yet as Turkle points out: “Growing up with robots in roles traditionally reserved for people is different from coming to robots as an already socialized adult” (Turkle 2011, 56).

Turkle’s ethnographic work has always reflected her background in psychoanalysis and her work with children and senior citizens has been grounded in an awareness of the complexities of the human life cycle, something seldom given attention in philosophy of technology, which despite the emphasis on human-technology relations, has often privileged the role of technology while ignoring the human being who uses that technology. Turkle is furthermore attuned to the vulnerabilities of human beings, the difficulties of forging human relationships in a fast-paced technological environment, and the impact of consumerism and advertizing in selling the promise of sociable robots, most of which has received little attention in the debate over relational artifacts. As she notes:

There has been a great deal of work on how to create relational artifacts and maximize their ability to evoke responses from people. Too little attention, however, has gone into understanding the human implications of this new computational paradigm, both in terms of how we relate to the world and in terms of how humans construct their sense of what it means to be human and alive. (Turkle 2002, 134)

Ultimately on these matters, Verbeek’s account of mediation focuses almost exclusively on technological mediation. The relations that co-constitute the human being are largely
technological. His framework says very little about the broader cultural forces that shape both human beings and technology and he has paid relatively little attention to the human beings that are being constituted. Technology, Verbeek repeatedly asserts, is the starting point. “Technology,” he writes, “forms the tissue of meaning within which our existence takes shape” (Verbeek 2009, 10). As David Kaplan has noted in a review of Verbeek’s earlier work, Verbeek “tends to treat mediation as a personal affair, not a social affair” (Kaplan 2009, 236). He remains relatively uninterested in the historical nature of mediation and “the material conditions that shape and affect the present” (Kaplan 2009, 235). The human beings in human-technology relations are simply human beings, not actual flesh and blood beings with a life cycle and a determinate history, culture, gender, age, or class.

Consider again the dilemma presented by Corry, Allenby, and the status of Alicia. In the human-technology relation represented by Corry and Alicia, to what extent is Corry’s relationship with Alicia a product of his own profound dependence and loneliness? Had Corry encountered Alicia in a different situation or context, might he have been less likely to enter into a relationship with this sociable robot? His openness to the relation is, as Turkle might note, a product of the right “Darwinian buttons” being pushed at the right time in the wrong situation. Furthermore, while Alicia is presented initially as something of a gift, something to alleviate Corry’s loneliness, it also assuages Allenby’s own sense of guilt. As he states, “…it’s not easy handling this kind of assignment. Stopping here four times a year and having to look at a man’s agony” (Sterling 1959). Alicia serves not only to ease Allenby’s guilt but also to render Corry more placid despite his harsh treatment at the hands of a techno-bureaucratic penal system. She becomes an integral part of his life and he is no longer lonely and no longer angry. Had Allenby been more accepting of human-technology relations and Corry’s authentic love for Alicia, he
might just as easily have been willing to leave Corry behind imprisoned for life in a delusion designed and manufactured by a harsh penal system. Focusing solely on human-technology relations doesn’t permit us to fully comprehend the manner in which Corry is being manipulated and exploited through the introduction of Alicia. We fail to understand the full nature of human-technology relations when we fail to comprehend the complex and oftentimes fraught contexts in which those relations occur. From this broader perspective, Turkle’s concerns seem less naively old-fashioned.

What finally does all this suggest regarding the questions posed in the opening paragraph? How are we users to respond when the object world starts talking back and engaging us? What are we to make of this new dance between user and artifact? What we are left with I think is the recognition that we don’t yet have a comprehensive enough framework for fully addressing these metaphysical and normative questions. In thinking about human-technology relations, we need to begin with a framework that takes the human being and the technology equally seriously and devotes equal attention to both. The weakness in Turkle’s approach to relational artifacts has been her failure to come to terms with the complex nature of technology. Her strength has been her attention to the human being who is using that technology. The strength in Verbeek’s analysis has been his robust account of technology. The weakness has been the scarcity of attention paid to the actual user of the technology.

More pointedly, perhaps our difficulties begin with that word “user,” centered as it is on the human being first and foremost as a user of technology (made even starker given its connotations of addiction). While a more comprehensive framework may yet be elusive, I’d like to suggest that such a framework ought to ultimately tack more in the direction of Turkle than Verbeek. That is, in working towards a more comprehensive framework for the evaluation of
human-technology relations, we need to keep in mind that the human being is more than a mere user of technology and exists in relation to more than technology. Technology is not the tissue of meaning within which our existence takes shape. Human culture and society is, of which surely technology is a large part, just not the only part and sometimes not even the most fundamental part. We are not first and foremost tool using animals but social animals shaped and mediated by human community. Turkle’s worries about relational artifacts remind us perhaps that in approaching human-technology relations from a more comprehensive framework, we ought to critically question the institutions and cultural frameworks that shape technology. We should always ask “who made this?”, “what for?”, and “how do they benefit?”. Furthermore, these critical interrogations should privilege neither technology nor institutions as fundamental but ought to begin with the human being in relation with other human beings.

This is the strength of Turkle’s focus on children and the elderly, for it is here that the existence of community is most fraught. Children have yet to be fully socialized into adult community and the elderly are at risk of being marginalized as objects or non-persons existing on the margins of human community. Turkle forcefully articulates the significance of human beings caring for vulnerable others and the role this caring plays in founding human community. As she notes, “Humans need to be surrounded by human touch, faces, and voices. Humans need to be brought up by humans” (Turkle 2011, 292) She also recognizes that in caring for the elderly we confirm our own humanity.

We know that the time we spend caring for children, doing the most basic things for them, lays down a crucial substrate. On this ground, children become confident that they are loved no matter what. And we who care for them become confirmed in our capacity
to love and care. The ill and the elderly also deserve to be confirmed in this same sense of basic trust. As we provide it, we become more fully human. (Turkle, 2011, 292)

This is a theme that has been central to much of feminist philosophy, especially feminist ethics, for more than thirty years and it is unfortunate that Turkle seldom explicitly draws out this connection. It is worth making this connection explicit, though, as feminist ethicists have long argued for precisely the kind of relational ontology that is at the heart of Verbeek’s and Coeckelbergh’s amodernist philosophy of technology. But where Verbeek and Coeckelbergh begin with human-technology relations, Turkle and feminist ethicists argue that it is caring that forms the core relation in shaping human life and community, not our relation to technology. A relational ontology of the sort championed by Verbeek, Latour, and others might begin not with our relation to technology but with our relation to one another. Feminist ethicists have long recognized the significance of such an ontology and its challenge to the same Enlightenment (and one might add masculinist) model critiqued by Verbeek and Latour. As feminist philosopher Susan Sherwin notes in “Whither Bioethics? How Feminism Can Help Reorient Bioethics,”

Feminist relational theorists have helped make vivid and comprehensible the fact that persons are, inevitably, connected with other persons and with social institutions. We are not isolated atoms, or islands, or self-contained entities, but rather products of historical, social, and cultural processes and interactions. The existence of any person is dependent on the existence and social arrangements of many others. Our interests are discovered by and pursued within social environments that help to shape our identities, characters, and opportunities. (Sherwin 2008, 12)
Given the significance of caring relations and community to fostering human lives, we might justifiably criticize developments that threaten it. Writing in another context, the British philosopher Kate Soper has also been critical of the disappearing boundary between human and technology and observes that doubts about our congress with machines might reflect a “species-specific and exclusive need for us to police divisions…whose maintenance is seen as a condition of the possibility of any human community” (Soper 2009, 229). Our increasingly technologically mediated lives and a growing awareness of the role being played by emotionally engaging sociable robots may, in this regard, threaten care, one of the conditions of possibility of human community.

This suggests that as we begin to assess the significance of human-technology relations and think about our relation to the object world, we cannot begin from the standpoint of the technology but must begin with the importance of human-human relations. We don’t begin with technology but with human cultural life and the community that sustains it. Contained within human culture is technology. It is a part of our lives and we shouldn’t demonize it. But we shouldn’t begin with technology either and our focus on human beings has to be a focus on the actual beings that we are, in all our humbleness recognizing our deficiencies and vulnerabilities but wary of employing technical fixes for those vulnerabilities and deficiencies.

Having just argued that perhaps Turkle is justified in privileging human beings when thinking about human-technology relations, allow me to conclude by returning not to Corry and Allenby and their dispute but to Alicia. For in the debate over whether Alicia is a mere thing or a human being, we can easily lose sight of the fact that Alicia is also a she. Alicia is built as a woman and is explicitly coded as feminine. She’s brought into this alien and entirely masculine world (the only other characters in the show are all men), tasked with caring for Corry by a
patriarchal penal system attempting to manipulate his “Darwinian buttons,” and then brutally shot in the face when her services are no longer needed, a mere “fragment of a man’s life.” In this masculine, high-tech environment, where human-technology relations are explicitly foregrounded, it is the work of caring, nurturing and sustaining life that is suppressed and finally extinguished. Perhaps “The Lonely” enjoys its watershed status for reminding us that our focus ought not to be on the object world and the status of relational artifacts so much as on the role of caring for others in sustaining a human world. In the absence of such care, we risk becoming like Corry, inanimate, just an item sitting in the sand.

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