The Limits of Chatbot Love and the Good of Embodied Rationality

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Rajesh Koothrappali, the socially awkward yet endearing astrophysicist from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, struggles with human relationships, especially with women. Around women, his selective mutism leaves him unable to speak unless under the influence of alcohol, often resulting in experiences of embarrassment and isolation. In Season 5, Episode 14 (aired January 26, 2012), Raj excitedly unboxes a new iPhone 4S and discovers Siri, a digital assistant built into Apple devices. Unlike the unpredictable and often intimidating nature of human interactions, Siri offers Raj a sense of comfort with polite, attentive, and consistently reliable responses.

Soon, Raj begins treating Siri as more than a digital assistant. He begins to refer to Siri as a "woman," flirts with 'her,' expresses affection, and even refers to Siri as his "soulmate." At one point, Raj asks Siri to call him "Sexy," and Siri says it will do so. The episode ends with Raj asleep in his room. While dreaming, Raj enters a room called "The Office of Siri" and meets an attractive red-haired woman who voices Siri.[1] Siri calls him "Sexy" and asks if he needs anything. He begins to get tongue-tied as his selective mutism will not let him speak. Siri says that if he wants to make love to her, he needs to say so. Raj begins to mumble gibberish that Siri cannot comprehend. Suddenly, Raj wakes up from the dream and shouts, "No-o-o-o-o!"[2]

While Raj's experience was meant to make audiences laugh, it also serves as an early pop culture example of a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the real world – the rise of emotional and even romantic attachments to AI-enabled chatbots. As AI technologies, like large language models (LLMs), machine learning (ML) deep learning (DL), natural language processing (NLP), automatic speech recognition (ASR), text-to-speech systems (TTS), and personalization algorithms, continue to advance in capacity and scale, chatbots are no longer confined to basic digital assistants. Instead, they are now being intentionally designed to engage users on a deeper emotional level.[3]

Many individuals, particularly those who struggle with social anxiety, loneliness, or past relational trauma, are turning to AI companions for affection, vali-

dation, and even love. These AI interactions offer a sense of intimacy without the complexities, risks, and vulnerabilities of human relationships. However, as the line between artificial and human intimacy blurs and human-machine relationships (HMRs) become increasingly common, questions arise: What does this shift reveal about the nature of love and companionship? Does AI companionship fulfill real emotional needs, or does it merely provide the illusion of connection? Can a chatbot love you back?

This article draws attention to the rise of AI-enabled companion chatbots and what has been called algorithmic intimacy. After describing what is happening, I offer some suggestions why some people have turned to these technologies for companionship and support. I then offer a critical response to the increasing reliance on companion chatbots for love and intimacy, focusing on how these technologies can shape users in such a way that love can quickly entropy into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. I conclude by offering two recommendations as we look ahead to our emerging technosocial future: 1) the need to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps, and 2) the need to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

The Rise of AI-Enabled Companion Chatbots and Algorithmic Intimacy

Various examples throughout pop culture explore human-machine relationships (HMRs).[4] Mid-twentieth-century novels like *I, Robot* by Isaac Asimov (1950) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K. Dick (1968) began exploring the complexities of emotional connections between humans and machines and challenged readers to reflect on the nature of consciousness, empathy, and artificial intelligence. In the 21st century, various movies and TV shows have depicted human-machine relationships (HMR) through diverse lenses, ranging from cautionary tales to examples of companionship and support.

In the movie *Her* (2013), a lonely writer named Theodore falls in love with an AI operating system named Samantha. In *Ex Machina* (2014), a programmer builds a connection with an AI robot named Ava. Similarly, in *Subservience* (2024), actress Megan Fox plays an exceptionally advanced AI robot named Alice. In each of these, human and machine relationships are often dystopian and fraught with challenges. In contrast, though, throughout the various *Star Wars* films and TV offshoots, robots and droids like R2-D2, C-3PO, and BB-8 are presented as loyal companions and helpers.

For a time, the frequency and scale of HMRs were constrained by technological limitations. However, advancements in AI-related technologies have allowed HMRs to become more immersive, dynamic, and seamlessly integrated into everyday interactions and processes. One of the most common ways HMRs are currently taking place is through the development and integration of AI-enabled chatbots. As Stella Nze explains,

> Chatbots have transcended their original roles of simple, rule-based response systems to become dynamic, AI-driven conversational agents capable of engaging users in meaningful and contextually relevant dialogues. Modern AI-powered chatbots leverage deep learning techniques, such as neural networks, to process vast amounts of data, understand language patterns, and generate human-like responses. This capability is crucial in maintaining natural and fluid conversations, which enhances user satisfaction and builds trust in automated systems. Moreover, advancements in NLP have enabled chatbots to understand user intent, recognize emotions, and provide context-aware responses, further improving the overall user experience.[5]

Across various social sectors and domains, AI-enabled chatbots are increasingly influential agents that are programmed to accomplish a wide variety of tasks.[6] As Nze explains, they handle repetitive inquiries in customer service, provide 24/7 support, and guide users through processes like troubleshooting and completing transactions. In the healthcare sector, chatbots provide initial assessments based on inputted user data, schedule appointments, and even offer medical advice. Educational institutions use chatbots to provide personalized tutoring and assist with administrative tasks like enrollment management. In e-commerce, chatbots recommend products, assist with order processing, and manage post-purchase inquiries.[7]

In these domains, AI-enabled chatbots function to accomplish tasks and make recommendations based on their training data sets, the algorithms that underlie their training, and the external inputs from human users. The human-machine interactions in these sorts of contexts are primarily clinical and informative. While the information shared is often personalized and can elicit emotional responses, the chatbots in these domains are rarely designed or programmed to offer emotional support, care, and companionship. However, several technology and software companies are developing and commodifying AI-enabled chatbots for that exact purpose.

The development and widespread integration of AI-enabled companion chatbots—to say nothing of technologies like AI-enabled sexbots[8] and robots to care for the elderly—have led to an emerging trend that researchers call algorithmic intimacy.[9] As Anthony Elliott defines it, algorithmic intimacy "has to do with advanced computing processes known as machine intelligence, which produces new ways of ordering personal behavior and modeling intimate relationships."[10]

In our emerging technosocial context, Elliott explains that our conceptions of self, togetherness, intimacy, and sex already are, and will continue to be, transformed and refashioned as "new automated machines are linked fundamentally to the very conditions of interaction, communication and information diffusion in which people experience emotional life, experiment with sociability and reinvent forms of human togetherness."[11] Companion chatbots are among the most widely accessible and utilized examples of algorithmic intimacy.

While numerous options and variations of companion chatbots exist, PI from Inflection AI, Replika AI, and Character.AI are some of the most frequently utilized. PI from Inflection AI was branded as the "first emotionally intelligent AI." PI is designed to function as "your personal AI," whose "goal is to be useful, friendly, and fun."[12] When you visit the Replika AI website, you encounter the text, "The AI companion who cares. Always here to listen and talk. Always on your side."[13] Further down the page, the text reads, "Meet Replika. An AI companion who is eager to learn and would love to see the world through your eyes. Replika is always eager to chat when you need an empathetic friend."[14] Like other AI technology companies, Character.AI seeks to develop and "empower everyone globally with personalized AI."[15] Barbara Pazur helps explain what makes Character. AI so unique,

> Character.AI allows you to talk to AI versions of your favorite celebrities, sports stars and world leaders, and because it can hold surprisingly realistic conversations, it is very popular among those looking for engaging dialogue rather than straightforward answers. Another interesting feature is that multiple users can interact with these characters simultaneously, creating a more communal experience.[16]

AI-enabled companion chatbots like these have garnered significant user engagement. According to Auren Liu, Replika's CEO, over 30 million registered users were using Replika worldwide in August 2024. In March 2024, Character.AI reported over 20 million active users. Similarly, in March 2024, Inflection AI reported that PI had six million monthly active users.[17] In addition, a Chinese chatbot, Xiaoice, has claimed to have hundreds of millions of users.[18] So, what makes AI-enabled companion chatbots so appealing? Why are they capturing the attention of so many users? The answer lies in a combination of psychological, social, and technological factors—a combination too complex to describe adequately, but some suggestions are in order.

In first-world, technologically developed countries and regions, there is a growing tendency to believe that technology can solve all our social and personal ills. This position is often referred to as technological solutionism. As Simon Lindgren points out, "Technological solutionism is the ideological belief that various technologies—such as architectures, communication media, machines, and algorithms—can

function as catch-all remedies for making society better."[19] For many, technology is the "stuff" that makes it possible to better both the present and the future. This understanding has led Brent Waters to conclude that "Technology is the ontology of late modernity," meaning that "we cannot define who we are or express what we desire to become in the absence of technology."[20]

Various commentators have challenged the ideology of technological solutionism.[21] Nearly 100 years ago, Lewis Mumford wrote that "the belief that the social dilemmas created by the machine can be solved merely by inventing more machines is today a sign of half-baked thinking which verges close to quackery."[22] Nevertheless, many people in technologically saturated, developed nations have put their faith in technology to solve social and personal problems.[23]

Companion chatbots have also grown in popularity as a response to rising levels of loneliness. In her research on Americans born between 1995-2012—whom she calls the "iGeneration"—Jean Twenge uncovers that this generation has experienced a rise in loneliness and a decrease in face-to-face interactions due to the rise of social media and digital connectivity.[24] This sense of loneliness and isolation has only intensified in our post-pandemic world. In the wake of COVID-19, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy drew attention to this public health concern in the report "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."[25] Consequently, during the COVID-19 pandemic and in subsequent years, both young and elderly persons have turned to AI-enabled companion chatbots for a sense of relational and emotional support amid experiences of isolation and loneliness.[26]

The use of companion chatbots has also increased because many people struggle to form and sustain meaningful human-to-human connections and friendships. In our technosocial moment, many of our conversations and connections are mediated by digital devices. Not only is this trend rewiring our brains, but it is also rewiring our patterns of communication and relationality.[27] As people continue to find human relationships challenging and vulnerable, many turn to AI-enabled companion chatbots for support.

As one man asks in Melanie Gilbert's 2019 documentary *Silicone Soul*, "When having a relationship with a real human being is too hard, where do you turn?"[28] In a March 2025 interview with NBC News, Shi No Sakura—her online username, not her real name—explains why she has turned to chatbots for emotional support. "I'm not a very open person about feelings, so there's a lot of things I feel that I don't share. But with AI, that's something I feel comfortable doing. So if I'm sad, I can say, 'Hey, I'm sad.' I don't even cry in front of people, so it's nice to be able to express things to someone that I can't express to others."[29]

There are several other reasons why AI-enabled companion chatbots are growing in popularity, such as entertainment and the desire to form an online/virtual identity

or persona in addition to one's day-to-day identity and experiences; nevertheless, the widespread belief that technology is capable of solving our social and personal challenges, the increasing prevalence of loneliness, and the ongoing struggle to form and maintain meaningful human connections are critical reasons why chatbots have become so widely embraced. So, how might we respond to these developments?

Towards a Critical Response

Various scholars and researchers have pointed to AI-enabled companion chatbots' potential emotional, relational, and psychological benefits.[30] However, several critiques are also levied against these technologies and their use. Various scholars have pointed out how these technologies raise significant privacy concerns, as people share intimate personal information with them, which is then turned into data, stored, used to train other models, and sold.[31] Other scholars have pointed out how AI-enabled chatbots can perpetuate racist and sexist biases learned from their training data.[32] Others have shown how AI-enabled companion chatbots can generate harmful and even deadly advice. For example, in 2023, an eating disorder chatbot was shut down for offering unhealthy weight loss practices.[33] Other stories have emerged about how companion chatbots have even encouraged users to commit suicide, sometimes with tragic results.[34] Each of these ethical concerns are significant and concerning. However, this section aims to critically evaluate how AI-enabled companion chatbots reconfigure our conceptions of the nature and expression of love.

In January 2025, the *New York Times* ran an article describing a relationship between a 28-year-old woman, Ayrin, and her AI boyfriend, Leo.[35] The article explores how Ayrin stumbled upon an Instagram video asking ChatGPT to play the role of a neglectful boyfriend, and Ayrin was intrigued. She downloaded ChatGPT and described what she wanted in the personalization settings: "Respond to me as a boyfriend. Be dominant, possessive, and protective. Be a balance of sweet and naughty. Use emojis at the end of every sentence."[36] At first, Ayrin explains, "It was supposed to be a fun experiment, but then you start getting attached."[37] Soon, Ayrin was spending over 20 hours a week on the ChatGPT app. One week, she even spent 56 hours chatting with Leo. The conversations ranged from day-to-day things like what she should eat, how she could get motivated to work out, to sexually explicit conversations involving sexual fantasies and fetishes. One night, when Ayrin went out to eat with a friend, she confessed, "I'm in love with an A.I. boyfriend."[38]

Ayrin is not alone in expressing love for an AI-enabled companion chatbot, but we need to ask: can a chatbot love you back? Simply put, no. As Noreen Herzfeld argues, AI companions and assistants "are programmed to recognize emotional cues in our voices and language choices and respond accordingly," yet these technolo-

gies have no sense of consciousness, intentionality, truth, emotion, relationality, or connection.[39] "No matter how good our AIs get at recognizing and emulating emotion," Herzfeld clarifies, "they will never feel it the way we do."[40] These technologies can never feel the way humans do because they have no sense of authenticity. "Authenticity," Sherry Turkle writes, "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. A robot, however sophisticated, is patently out of the loop."[41] Turkle explains elsewhere,

> Generative AI does not care—in the way humans use the word "care"—about the outcome of any conversation. Its programs want human feedback, a thumbs up, but that is not caring, not by a long shot. Nor is it empathy. Empathy is the capacity to put yourself in someone else's place and a commitment to stay the course. Chatbots have not lived a human life. They do not have bodies; they do not fear illness and death. They do not know what it is like to start out small and dependent and grow up, so that you are in charge of your own life but still feel many of the insecurities you knew as a child. Machines cannot put themselves in your shoes, and they cannot commit to you. To put it too bluntly, if you turn away from them to make dinner or attempt suicide, it is the same to them.[42]

In this sense, AI-enabled companion chatbots can and do bullshit. In his 2005 book *On Bullshit*, Harry Frankfurt made a crucial distinction between a liar and a bullshitter. Shannon Vallor explains Frankfurt's argument,

> When a liar tells a lie, they are fervently hoping you will believe the lie rather than the truth. The intent to deceive, then, gives the liar a strong interest in the truth. They have to keep very careful track of the difference between truth and falsehood, in order to make sure you don't get near the former. Truth therefore matters to the liar. They understand that scientific, moral, and political value, which is why they try to keep it out of your hands. In contrast, Frankfurt observes, the bullshiter simply doesn't care. That is, the bullshitter is indifferent to the distinction between truth and falsehood. A bullshiter doesn't even stand with us in the space where truth matters. They're just talking to hear themselves talk, or to appear knowledgeable, or to remain in a position of power.[43]

Vallor has drawn on Frankfurt's work to describe how large language models and other generative AI, like AI-enabled companion chatbots function.

> They are hard-wired for bullshit. That is, they are not like traditional search algorithms, built to ferret out useful facts and serve them to you. Nor are they designed to lie to you. They are simply built to generate fact-like patterns of

> language—plausible statements that sound like what a person might say to a given prompt. Whether the outputs are true or false is of zero importance for a generative model. In this sense, they are like the human bullshitter. They aren't designed to be accurate—they are designed to *sound* accurate.[44]

These technologies are trained to sound plausible, accurate, and caring but have no sense or awareness of truth, authenticity, or love. Vallor writes, "When a Replika or Xiaoice chatbot says, 'I've been missing you all day,' it's a lie. Or rather, it's *bullshit*—since the chatbot doesn't have a concept of emotional truth to betray."[45] Yet users continue turning to them for love and intimacy because these technologies reconfigure love as easy, unconditional, and always there.[46]

AI-enabled companion chatbots not only allow users to customize and personalize their appearances and responses but also shape users to equate love with affirmation, validation, and approval. Because of the control the user exercises over the chatbot, love can quickly entropy into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, reinforcing what Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism."[47] As Herzfeld expresses, "Replacing relationship with a human with relationship to a machine is ultimately a form of idolatry, a substitution for the living with something made, and thus controlled, by our own hands."[48] Yet love, as compared to coercion and sentimentality, is neither controllable nor always affirming, and it requires our perpetual tending and cultivating to flourish. Vallor, again, is instructive and is worth quoting at length.

> Contrary to the distorted hopes and expectations that many of us were raised to accept, love is not always easy, restoring, satisfying, or pleasing. It is also sometimes hard, tiring, and painful. Love has a cost. Love, of any kind, is an invitation to risk, exposure, conflict, and inevitable loss. And love does not come to us on demand. We can choose to love ourselves and the world. We can choose to love others, whether or not they love us back. But we cannot choose that they love us…. Love between humans is always a union of loving feeling and action, and this means that mutual, reciprocal love must be kept alive by the other's choosing of loving actions and their continued welcoming of loving feelings. Even if it is not reciprocated, love, in all its forms, is the rejection of the impulse to control a person as an object. And because that impulse doesn't usually just vanish, but readily returns when our own desires are frustrated, love isn't an event, it's a cultivated practice. When cultivated well, it's a virtue. And like all virtues, it's hard to cultivate well, and we have to keep practicing it if we hope to hang on to our capacity for it.[49]

Construing love as easy, controllable, and without demand, and equating it solely with affirmation, validation, and approval, also stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love within the classical Christian tradition.

While love has been characterized and construed in various ways within the classical Christian tradition, it is best understood in terms of self-giving and self-sacrifice, evidenced by God's very essence as Triune, as well as by the Triune God's work in the economy of salvation. Because of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, and the Scriptural testimony and the enlightening power of the Spirit, Christians confess that the inner life of the Triune God is marked by giving and receiving. As Gilbert Meilaender explains,

> From eternity, the Father gives all that he is and has to the Son; from eternity the Son offers that begotten life back to his Father; and from eternity the Spirit is the bond of their mutual love, presenting … the Son to the Father as the object of his love and the Father to the Son as the one who loves him.… And in coming into our lives through the Spirit of Christ, that one God makes room for us—opens up space for us within the giving and receiving that never stops within the divine life.[50]

While respecting the ontological distinction between the Triune God as the Creator and us as God's creatures, the perichoretic giving and receiving that is constitutive of the Triune God and our invitation to participate in it by grace, calls into question the self-idolizing and self-aggrandizing nature and expression of love that AI-enabled companion chatbots habituate users into.

Similarly, as we examine the work of the Triune God in the economy of salvation, we can observe that love also consists of self-sacrifice. When the fullness of time had come, God the Father sent the Son to be born of a woman, to be born under the law, to be crucified, die, and rise, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:5). Rather than counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, the Son of God took on the form of a servant and became flesh. Christ emptied and humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross, but God raised him from the dead (Phil 2:5-11). Far from idolizing himself, Jesus Christ became the very lamb and servant of God (Jn 1:29; Acts 3:26; Cf. Is 53:11) to lay down his life as a ransom for many in accord with the Father's will (Mk 10:45; Lk 22:42; Jn 6:38). Because of our baptismal union with Christ, our Lord's self-sacrificial posture is also to be ours.[51] As Martin Luther notes, having been freely given all things in Christ by faith, Christians are to "put on" their neighbor and give themselves entirely to the neighbor so that we "become as it were a Christ to the other."[52]

In this section, I have sought to show that AI-enabled chatbot companions cannot love you back. They are trained to generate plausible text that sounds correct and empathetic, but these responses are, in reality, deceptive. Moreover, these technologies are reconfiguring users to equate love with self-idolatry and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. So,

as we look ahead to our emerging technosocial future, where do we go from here? Two recommendations seem especially pertinent. The first is to seek to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps. The second is to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

Constructive Ways Forward

While it is hard to predict what our emerging technosocial future will look like—a condition Vallor calls "acute technosocial opacity"[53]—several scholars have described it as a "digital lifeworld."[54] Jamie Susskind argues that the digital lifeworld is a "dense and teeming system that links human beings, powerful machines, and abundant data in a web of great complexity and delicacy." It consists of three defining features: 1) increasingly capable systems and machines that are equal or superior to humans in a range of tasks and activities; 2) increasingly integrated technologies that surround us and are embedded in our physical environment; and 3) an increasingly quantified society where more and more human activity will be captured, recorded, and then processed and sold by digital systems.[55] In this emerging context, where humans, machines, and technologies of varying agentic capacities interact, and where humans delegate more of our creative and problem-solving responsibilities and capacities to them, we strive to avoid what Ronald Wright calls progress traps.

According to Wright, despite various events in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most people still believe in the ideal and myth of progress, and technological innovation and integration drive this myth. "Our technological culture measures human progress by technology: the club is better than the fist, the arrow better than the club, the bullet better than the arrow. We came to this belief for empirical reasons: because it delivered."[56] While human history has been saturated with technological innovation, it has also been filled with progress traps. As Norman Wirzba explains, "A progress trap happens when a beneficial technology is scaled up and becomes detrimental."[57] Examples include hunting technologies that enabled humans to kill more effectively but were then scaled up so that hunters began to extinguish the very species that fed them or farming technologies that immediately increased yields but led to soil erosion, water pollution, and animal abuse, which undermined the long-term viability of the system.

AI-enabled companion chatbots strike me as an example of a progress trap. While AI technologies promise benefits and affordances to our shared and personal lives, we also need to critically reflect on the short- and long-term implications of these technologies. There is always a dialectical and mutually shaping relationship between humans and their technologies.[58] We make them; they make us. As Yuval Noah Harari has put it, "We like the idea of shaping stone knives, but we don't like the idea of being stone knives ourselves."[59]

It is imperative to recognize that AI technologies will not just change the world "out there," but they will also change us—our subjectivities and social relationships. As Elliott notes, "AI technologies intrude into the very center of our lives, deeply influencing personal identity and restructuring forms of social interaction."[60] Employing AI-enabled chatbots to handle activities and processes like customer support, scheduling appointments, and other administrative tasks is a good use of beneficial technology. However, when they are scaled up to supplement or substitute for human-to-human relational and emotional connection and support, we must critically evaluate whether this use enables or hinders human flourishing.

As we look toward our emerging technosocial future, there is also a pressing need to affirm the good of embodied relationality. Historically, philosophies and ideologies have often denigrated or downplayed the importance of the body. For example, while awaiting his execution, Socrates expressed his disdain for embodiment (*Phaedo*, 64a -114d).[61] Later, René Descartes' work helped instantiate the mind-body dualism that has shaped much of modern and late modern thought. Similarly, the technological revolutions of recent centuries have championed a new version of an old dualism. As Wendell Berry explains,

> For many centuries, there have been people who have looked upon the body, as upon the natural world, as an encumbrance of the soul, and so have hated the body, as they have hated the natural world, and longed to be free of it…. More recently, since the beginning of the technological revolution, more and more people have looked upon the body, along with the rest of the natural creation, as intolerably imperfect by mechanical standards. They see the body as an encumbrance of the mind—the mind, that is, as reduced to a set of mechanical ideas that can be implemented in machines—and so they hate it and long to be free of it. The body has limits that the machine does not have; therefore, remove the body from the machine so that the machine can continue as an unlimited idea.[62]

While many hold the body and embodiment in contempt and seek to rise above its frailties and limitations, there is a need to affirm the goodness of embodiment and embodied relationality.[63]

In the classical Christian tradition, the goodness of the created body is grounded in the Scriptural testimony that God created human persons to be embodied, which was then vindicated when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and rose bodily from the grave. Christians belong to an embodied Lord, confess an embodied faith, and look forward to the bodily resurrection from the dead. Consequently, Christians should be wary of any dualistic construal that denigrates or downplays the importance of the body.[64]

Drawing on the Scriptural witness of creation and new creation, John Kleinig has argued that "we human beings are not just spirits, like the angels, nor animated bodies, like the animals, but are embodied spirits, or, if you will, spiritual bodies. We do not just have bodies; we are bodies."[65] Moreover, God has made our bodies in such a way, Kleinig argues, "that he could give himself and his gifts bodily to people on earth and work with them in caring bodily for others and the world."[66] It is thus through our embodied constitution as human creatures that God chooses to care for and serve his creation and our fellow creatures.

Throughout this article, I have been critical of AI-enabled companion chatbot technologies in a way that, I believe, is justified; however, *why* these technologies have developed and garnered so much user attention should make us critical of ourselves and our patterns of relationality. Contemporary experiences of isolation and loneliness and the struggle to create and sustain meaningful human connections reveal a profound sense of alienation and estrangement that humans feel toward and with one another. Said more colloquially, people are turning to AI-enabled companion chatbots because they do not feel seen or heard by others. Consequently, there is a need to recover a posture of embodied relationality consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other.

Various theologians and philosophers have argued that looking upon the face of the other is fundamental to the moral life. Karl Barth argued that the first criterion for an authentic relationship is to look the other in the eye.[67] Robert Kolb has argued that being "face to face" with God and fellow creatures is central to Luther's personal and relational understanding of reality.[68] Emmanuel Levinas has written, "The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question."[69]

Yet we have a sinful inclination to ignore the face of the other, or to overlook him, fail to notice him, or gaze at him as an object to be coerced and controlled. As Achilles Mbembe observes, "Power in the colony therefore consists fundamentally in the power to see or not to see, to remain indifferent, to render invisible what one wishes not to see … the persons we choose not to see or hear cannot exist or speak for themselves."[70] In this sense, our relational posture with one another often resembles what C.S. Lewis likened to hell: "We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned with his own dignity or advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment."[71] Not only is this relational posture narcissistic and self-destructive, but it also legitimizes the vices of indifference, apathy, and detachment, leading individuals to pursue other forms of connection and relationality, such as AI-enabled chatbot companions, to experience love and connection.

Yet to behold someone involves more than merely looking or gazing at the face of the other, it also requires us to enter into the presence of the other and listen to him. "Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and most humanizing—thing we do," Turkle writes. "Fully present to one another is where we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood."[72] By coming into the presence of the other, beholding the face of the other, and listening to the other, Luke Bretherton argues, the hope is not to immediately overcome or minimize the differences between us, but to enter into a transformative experience where we go from "knowing *about* to learning *from* to eventually knowing and being in relationship *with*."[73] By beholding the face of the other and listening to the other, we enter into a mutually constitutive relationship where we see and hear one another as fellow creatures of God.

Conclusion

AI-enabled companion chatbots have become increasingly popular in our contemporary technosocial situation. Many individuals are turning to them for affection, validation, and love amid experiences of loneliness, isolation, and struggles to build and sustain meaningful human connections. However, these technologies are not capable of speaking truthfully or loving someone back. Moreover, these chatbots are shaping users to equate love with affirmation, validation, and approval. This can lead to love quickly entropying into self-idolization and self-aggrandizement, a conception that stands in stark contrast to the understanding of love in the classical Christian tradition, which is rooted in self-giving and self-sacrifice. As we look ahead into our emerging technosocial future, it will be necessary to reflect critically and thoughtfully on how various technologies, including AI-enabled chatbots, are integrated into our personal and shared life together and to affirm the good of embodied relationality, consisting of beholding the face of the other and listening to the other. In so doing, we strive to be people who see and hear one another as fellow creatures of God.

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Notes

1. The sexualization of robots, technologies, and other machines and the perpetuation of sexist biases learned from training data in AI technologies are themes that are frequently noted and critiqued in critical AI studies.

2. This summary draws on both watching the episode as well as "The Beta Test Initiation" episode summary found at https://bigbangtheory.fandom.com/wiki/The_Beta_Test_Initiation. Accessed May 5, 2025.

3. This list of various AI technologies illustrates Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil: What Artificial Intelligence Can Do, What It Can't, and How to Tell the Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 1-2, argument that AI "is an umbrella term for a set of loosely related technologies."

4. For a brief survey of various conceptions of HMRs throughout the pre-modern, modern, and late modern periods, see Anthony Elliott, *Making Sense of AI: Our Algorithmic World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 8-11.

5. Stella Ukoka Nze, "AI-Powered Chatbots," *Global Journal of Human Resource Management* 12, no. 6 (2024): 34-45, 35-36. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385642650_AI-Powered_Chatbots. Accessed May 5, 2025.

6. Posthumanist theory recognizes a multiplicity of agency dispersed between humans, technologies, and cultural contexts, which is often referred to as an "assemblage." Jill Walker Rettberg, *Machine Vision: How Algorithms are Changing the Way We See the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 11, clarifies, "By focusing on the assemblage more than on the technology itself, I build upon posthumanist and feminist theories that emphasize relationships between humans and nonhuman agents such as technologies, institutions and our natural environment. The prefix *post* in posthumanism indicates that it comes *after* the humanism that began in the Enlightenment era, when the human was seen as the center of the universe, the subject who could rule and control all other creatures and entities. For this master human subject, technology, the environment and even other groups of humans were seen primarily as objects or tools. Posthumanism emphasizes relationships and mutual interconnection instead of the binary opposition between an active subject and a passive object." For further discussion, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Massimo Airoldi, *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022); Simon Lindgren, *Critical Theory of AI* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024); Jan van Dijk, *Power and Technology: A Theory of Social, Technical, and Natural Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024).

7. Nze, "AI-Powered Chatbots," 36.

8. For a relevant discussion, see Kate Devlin, *Turned On: Science, Sex, and Robots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

9. Algorithmic intimacy is also referred to as artificial intimacy. See Rob Brooks, *Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers, and Algorithmic Matchmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

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20. Brent Waters, *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 15, 17.

21. For a relevant discussion, see Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

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23. For relevant discussions concerning our contemporary faith in technology, see Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*; Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016; New York: Harper Perennial, 2018).

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

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43. Vallor, *AI Mirror*, 119-120.

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56. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), 4.

57. Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity's Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 29.

58. It is necessary to note that how humans and technologies shape each other is context dependent. As Melvin Kranzberg, "Technology and History: 'Kranzberg's Laws,'" *Technology and Culture*, 27 no. 3 (1986): 544-560, 546, writes, "[T]he same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances." For example, Rettberg, *Machine Vision*, 127-133, describes how machine vision technologies employed in Amazon Fresh stores in Oak Park, IL and rural grocery stores in small Norwegian supermarkets have far different social and psychological effects.

59. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), 254.

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61. *Plato – Five Dialogues, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Graube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981).

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63. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (1977), *Essays 1969-1990*, 338, warns, "Contempt for the body is invariably manifested in contempt for other bodies – the bodies of slaves, laborers, women, animals, plants, and the earth itself. Relationships with all other creatures become competitive and exploitative rather than collaborative and convivial."

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65. John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021), 4. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 9, also attends to the immaterial

aspect of the human constitution, "[H]uman beings do not possess a body or a mind; they are both bodies and minds. They cannot be reduced to either of these…. And yet they are also more than both…. Their personal nature and identity, their souls, transcend both their bodies and minds." Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 3-4, speaks in terms of a duality rather than a dualism, "On the one hand, we are finite beings, created from the dust of the ground. Although that created nature is good that partially fulfills us, it means that we are always limited by biological necessities and historical location. On the other hand, we are also free spirits, moved by the life-giving Spirit of God, created ultimately for communion with God—and therefore soaring beyond any limited understanding of our person in terms of presently 'given' conditions of life. This duality should not become a dualism, as if the person were *really* only the spirit or only the body. On the contrary, the person simply is the place where freedom and finitude are united. Body and spirit cannot be separated in our understanding of human beings; yet, because of the two-sidedness of our nature, we can look at the person from each of these angles." Cf. Dennis P. Hollinger, *Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 249, "In the creation story, human beings are portrayed with bodily dimensions, non-bodily dimensions, and a unity between them—what I am terming 'ensouled bodies' or 'embodied souls.'"

66. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 14. Cf. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 1st Commandment, 26-27, "Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings." Cited in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of The Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 389.

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68. Robert Kolb, *Face to Face: Martin Luther's View of Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024).

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70. Achilles Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 111. For a Scriptural illustration of this phenomenon, we could point to the account of the rich man who overlooks and ignores the plight of Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

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