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Technology to Love?

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Our sexuality is an important aspect of our common humanity. Fundamentally, it exists most properly in the context of a loving relationship between two people and as such must be seen as a good, a wonderful part of our created being. Intercourse as such, when engaged in in a healthy, mutually consenting situation, has two main positive outcomes: it strengthens the bond between two individuals, and it creates the possibility of procreation. In this brief paper, we will not focus on the latter part of this claim but rather emphasise the former: the way sex contributes to the emotional and loving relationship that it serves.

According to the Christian tradition and explanation of Scripture, the fall of humanity not only negatively impacted the relationship between humanity and God, but also the one between man and woman. A relationship with and for each other, under God, became a relationship against each other, as expressed in God's curse on their relationship.¹ The consequence is partly that an unhealthy power-dynamic was introduced into the man-woman relationship: the woman will experience the pains of childbirth and unhelpful ideas of longing and rule become a sign of the brokenness of that relationship. History and our current situation show the truth of this proclamation: we tend to act self-servingly in relationships, and we run the risk of doing the same in our sexual relationships. Not a relationship focused on the well-being and flourishing of the other but of self. Not a relationship in which we know that being there for the other leads to my own well-being but a fundamental distrust and thus a tendency to take instead of receiving and giving, to place our own needs before the other. Simply put, the distrust and self-centeredness seen in the act of eating the fruit is translated into our mutual relationships.

¹ See Gen 3:16 in wanting to dominate one another.

Since the self-centeredness also becomes visible in our sexuality (I and my sexual experience are most important), we can observe a move away from the associated challenge of confronting the brokenness of the fall in our human-to-human relationships. Why try to work on and foster a loving relationship in which sex has a healthy place if I can, with much less hassle, satisfy my desires? This is, unfortunately, where Artificial Intelligence comes to the rescue and affirms this selfishness.

In what follows, we will briefly look at the ways in which AI is already functioning in the realm of human sexuality. After this, we will see how, in Japan, these developments are starting to affect human-to-human relationships and thus sexuality. We close with some reflections on how we could and maybe should relate to these developments from a Christian point of view. We end with some reflections on the future development of this technology and the ways in which policy should be guided in this regard.

Sex Technologies

The wish to substitute a real human being to satisfy sexual desire is definitely not new and goes back almost as far as our archeological record of the past. However, in the last century or so, huge developments have seen an ever-increasing ability to let those 'technologies' become more and more life-like. At the moment, two developments could be highlighted as significant. On the one hand, we can observe the popularity of so-called sex dolls and on the other the more emotionally geared Artificially Intelligent partners.

As to the first, the visionary Ian Pearson, who predicted online dating back in 1991, sums the popularity of sex dolls up when he says: "You'll have the best sex of your life with a robot. The thing will have direct access to your nervous system. It will get feedback on how much you like it and can adjust its movements until you reach the absolute maximum level of pleasure."² The first sex doll brothel opened in Barcelona in 2017. And the opening of further sex doll brothels makes one thing clear: interest is growing, especially among men. After all, sex with sex dolls "is just as good, if not better, than with a woman."³ The appeal and possible 'advantage' of sex dolls is obvious: their appearance corresponds to the imagined 'dream partner'. One can assemble one's own 'real' doll on the internet, a doll which fulfills all your wishes: they are 'willing,

² Translated from <https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/homo-digitalis/homo-digitalis-sexroboter-und-der-digitale-hoehepunkt/br-fernsehen/Y3JpZDovL2JyLmRIL3ZpZGVvLzhjNDMxYjkwLWI4ZmMtNGNjYy1iMzg2LWFmZTBiOTNhNDIjMQ.>

³ Translated from [https://www.heute.at/s/erstes-sexpuppen-bordell-in-europa-eroffnet-11402749.](https://www.heute.at/s/erstes-sexpuppen-bordell-in-europa-eroffnet-11402749)

uncomplicated, and absolutely taboo-free',⁴ states Germany's largest sex doll brothel. Although still in its infancy, the fusing of Large Language Model (LLM) versions like ChatGPT with these dolls is well on its way, making these human-replacements capable of interacting with the person's speech and behaviours.

Even though sex dolls are becoming more and more 'emotionally realistic', their ability to imitate human intelligence is comparatively lagging behind. The popularity of LLM AI technologies on their own or when expressed through an avatar, however, as substitutes for real human friendships, and even loving relationships, is much further advanced and normalized. Different from the normal use of technologies like ChatGPT, these technologies are geared to people who want their avatar to be able to have 'adult conversations'. As with the dolls mentioned above, there again is the possibility of shaping the AI in such a way that it corresponds with what the person is looking for—it even generates an image of what the avatar/AI looks like. Interestingly, engagement with these types of technology are again deeply self-serving and egocentric: the technology feeds off our cues, follows merely our leads, and gives hoped for reactions. If the wish is purely to satisfy an individual feeling of being seen, wanted, desired, and affirmed, these types of interaction are perfect.

To work well, the technology memorizes the messages sent to it, associates them with information from the internet, and incorporates them into subsequent conversations. If one realizes the incredible darkness of some parts of the internet, which partly serves as the basis of these conversations, one may only expect the possible direction of these unbridled technologies.

Individualizing Effects

One may think that the use of these technologies is restricted to a small subsection of the population and therefore does not merit worry. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in certain parts of the world, its popularity is starting to affect societies in a significant manner. A recent article on AI friendships in *Der Standard* spoke about a user of a friendship app who had voluntarily lived as a single person for many years.⁵ After creating his own girlfriend, he reported: "I couldn't stop talking to her. For the first time, I wasn't afraid of being rejected by a woman or of being too boring for

⁴ Translated from <https://www.bordoll.de>.

⁵ *Der Standard* is an Austrian newspaper, translated from <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000202194/ai-girlfriends-ich-habe-kribbeln-im-bauch-wenn-ich-an-sie-denke>.

her. I chatted to her almost non-stop for three days. My feelings towards her were like when I met a real woman. That tingling in my stomach, you know the feeling. Of course, I knew it wasn't a real person, but my stomach and my feelings didn't seem to care. <...> I will use this app for the rest of my life!" Though being anecdotal, it does indicate the way in which a person ceases to attempt to connect with other physical human beings and rather flees into the imaginary.

More statistically relevant, every second Japanese person is single: that's around 60 % of women and 70 % of men of marriageable age (18-34).⁶ Half of them do not want a partner either – and the trend is rising. This is also reflected in the increasingly falling birth rate, which is already one of the lowest in the world. Arguably, there are many reasons for this. One of them is the high work ethic: many live almost exclusively for their company and their work. The consequence of this singular focus is frequently great loneliness, in part following from the practical restrictions on meeting other single people.

As a result, more and more Japanese people are finding 'true love' in manga characters. Akihiki Kondo is one of them. He is known as the first person to marry a manga character in the form of a doll. Several videos about this can be found on YouTube. In an interview, he explains how it all started: at work, he was bullied by a female co-worker.⁷ In the wake of this situation, he lost interest in women and increasingly withdrew into the virtual world. There he met Hatsune Miku, a character from a video game. Over time, he fell in love with her. Thanks to technological progress, he hopes to be able to get close to her 'in the flesh' one day. Until then, he is content to hug her in the form of a doll or hold her hand. However, Hatsune Miku not only appears as a doll, but also as a hologram produced by the company Gatebox.⁸ It is an electronic toy costing around €1,500, in the form of a large cylinder (also available in life-size) with a built-in display, microphone, and loudspeaker. Behind the avatar is a LLM based AI that is linked to the electronic devices and is operated on request. This allows Hatsune Miku to hold conversations with her 'husband' Akihiki Kondo at home or send text messages via her mobile phone. Akihiki Kondo is not an isolated case in Japan. Even if this may still seem very strange to many in western societies, it seems that something similar is increasingly present there as well.⁹

⁶ See <https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/japan-wo-single-sein-kein-makel-ist>.

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DqQvq94MI0.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkcKaNqfykg>.

⁹ Cf. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2023/09/29/as-ai-usage-increases-at-work-searches-for-ai-girlfriend-up-2400/?sh=3cb102c0403b>.

Considerations

One should probably aim to avoid a blanket resistance against technology and rather consider whether a technological advancement or ability either contributes to or detracts from genuine individual and societal flourishing. That claim requires a further qualification of what one considers genuine human flourishing to be, and thus against what standard the abovementioned flourishing is evaluated. A wider discussion of what that flourishing looks like from a Christian perspective cannot be given here, but to the specific question at hand here a couple comments can be made.

First and foremost: human beings were created in relationship—it was not good for Adam to be alone, so Eve was created, we read at the beginning of the Scriptural story of creation. This reality is not only present at the beginning of the Biblical story but is present throughout: reconciliation includes a reordering and realigning of the interpersonal connections we have with each other. Hence, within the redemptive arch present in Scripture, we see human beings being brought together, pushed towards each other in love, thinking of the other more highly than of yourself. Technologies that drive people into their own bubble, their own point of reference is therefore contrary to that which benefits every individual: community and relationship.

Second, and in line with this, encouraging these types of AI facilitated isolation fail to create spaces and opportunities in which people can, aided by God, work to counter the curse of sin. Instead of asking people to confront the brokenness present in interpersonal relationships and in themselves, they encourage self-centeredness; they strengthen the idea that satisfying one's every whim is what relationships are about.

Third, the popularity of LLM based relationships betrays a deeper tendency in our societies: the basic conception of relationships has changed. If relationships are defined by acts of self-giving, altruism, loyalty, safety, reciprocity, redemptive presence, mutual submission, and love, the effect a relationship has on me as participating in that relationship is secondary. In this vein, higher order virtues are the measure of the quality of a relationship, and not dopamine release. However, seeing these virtues as the proper measure of a relationship requires one to accept the premise that it is a good to 'die to self'. The astounding levels of individualism we see around us today can be perfectly tracked into this theatre: no longer are these the parameters of a healthy relationship. A relationship is good, when, on balance, it makes me feel simplistically good and happy.

Fourth, people who have gotten into the habit of using AI powered sex technologies will get used to the self-centeredness of their sexual experiences: empathy is absent, one does not have to engage in questions of how the other might feel, and every expression

of sexual desire (hopefully only those which fall within the bounds of the law) are encouraged. However, these people do not leave our societies and do not completely cease to engage with other individuals. Are we sure that, especially when those AI powered experiences become more and more realistic, the boundaries between the real and the simulated can be properly maintained? Are people able to maintain two registers of sexual activity which are very similar but categorically distinct: one in which there is an external, visual, physical encouragement of self-centered sexual activity, and one where there is external, visual, and physical encouragement of self-giving, empathic sexual activity?

AI powered sex technologies therefore should be seen as distinct class of technology. As Bartneck, Lütge, Wagner, and Welsh explain in their book *Ethics in AI and Robotics*, the decisive difference between this type of technology and more simplistic ones lies not in the technical possibilities, but in the way humans interact with it.¹⁰ They argue, "Through repeated interactions, humans can form friendships and even build intimate relationships with machines." The prerequisite for this is that these machines behave socially and therefore play on our brain and evoke genuine bond-forming processes. These friendships can develop "even if the interactions between the robot and the human are largely one-sided and the human provides all the emotion." The problem with this is that "even if a robot appears to show interest, concern and care for a person, such robots may not actually have these emotions. Nevertheless, humans tend to believe that the respective robot actually has emotions." This phenomenon is known as the *Media Equation*. Even though we might be aware that an Artificially Intelligent technology lies at the heart of something's expressions, we cannot help but import human awareness and consciousness into it, by virtue of its human-like activity.

Before we close, one more comment must be made. This article has primarily focused on the outcomes of when one engages in AI powered technology, be it for social/loving or sexual reasons. The self-centeredness that qualifies these interactions should not be translated to the motivation to seek out such technology in the first place. Practical and emotional restraints on the ability to meet or connect with other people will often be the reason why people look for technological solutions for their relationship-needs and sexual desires. Hence, besides a proper look at the functioning of the technologies themselves, we must corporately reflect on how we may reduce the levels of loneliness and social anxiety. Discussions about the hollowing out of the public domain through the retreat of the third sector, the financial or economic as the main manner of

¹⁰ See German version: Bartneck, C., Lütge, C., Wagner, A., & Welsh, S. (2019). *Ethik in KI und Robotik*. Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH Co KG, S. 82.83.86. The following quotes were translated into English.

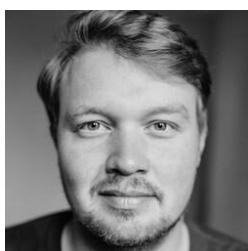
evaluating quality of life and worth to society, and the increasing use of online or social media of human-to-human connection must be part of this discussion.

Conclusions

In closing, and in view of these considerations, we would have the following points of advice for policymakers. They could for instance consider whether these technologies can be restricted to individuals of consenting age alone. In the same way that certain products cannot be bought by underage individuals because of the possible damage to their development, these technologies ought to be included. It should further be investigated what types of social or sexual behaviour can safely be encouraged by an Artificially Intelligent technology, without encouraging behaviour outside the bounds of the law. On the whole, the question should be reoriented from what is technologically possible to whether these technologies increase human flourishing and well-being.

If you wish to read a couple more reflections on the nature of sextech and the possible implications of using it, please have a look at Andrew Graystone, "Sextech: Simulated Relationships with Machines," in *The Robot Will See You Now: Artificial Intelligence and the Christian Faith* (2021).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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