

A Robot Love Symposium

Martijntje Smits

Starring:

Johan – a robot engineer

Kathleen – an ethicist

Erich – a philosopher of love

Sherry – a social constructivist

Phi – an actor

An anonymous flautist

That night, after the premiere of the documentary '*I am Alice*', the invitees moved to the cinema's large foyer. A melody shrilled through the room.

- Is this how our elderly will be taken care of? The horror! I can't see how...

- Oh, I thought the little girl was cute!

They had to shout to make themselves heard over the piercing sounds. It had been the whim of an assistant to enliven the after party with a robotic flute player.

- Could you turn that racket off for a minute? We want to have a serious conversation!

They sank into the heavily cushioned lounge seats that lined the room. Only **Johan**, the engineer, remained standing.

- Let's take turns speaking and do so slowly! Can I start?

Without waiting for a response he continued.

- First of all, thank you for accepting our invitation to this premiere of our documentary about Alice. Now let me first explain why we built her. We all know that loneliness among the elderly is a pressing problem nowadays, which will only increase if nothing is done.

The others sank deeper into their cushions.

- Now loneliness is about love. About a lack of love. It signifies a lack of meaningful interaction, painfully so. We all know the pain, more or less. We need someone to talk to, someone to respond

to our needs and our simple questions. It's a basic need, just like water. But the kids of these old age pensioners have work to go to and their friends live far away. Human care is more expensive than ever. So often their needs cannot be fulfilled by traditional form of human company...

Johan paused for a second.

- ... but now we have something that works. We do! Robotics for companionship is getting really advanced. You've seen Alice, our robotic doll. You've seen how she really makes contact, how the old ladies in the film brightened up when she was there. At first, they were quite sceptical about having a piece of technology as their new companion. As you are now. However, they gradually developed warm feelings.

Kathleen, the ethicist, sat up.

- Warm feelings? Where did you see warm feelings?

Johan: Well, think of the moment Alice comments on Mrs Wittmarschen's family photos; the lady whose only son lives abroad. Or when Alice sings a song with Mrs Schellekens-Blanke, who always loved singing. By the end there's a sense that Alice has almost become a friend, didn't you notice? They're even sad when Alice is taken back to the lab. So they had engaged in a real relationship. They perked up because of her attention. There was a sense of meaningful interaction. Their needs could be satisfied just by our little Alice.

Kathleen: A chutzpah! They engaged in a real relationship... the audacity! You just corrupted the grand, honourable notion of love. You'd like to make us believe that love can be consumed like any other product, that it can be turned into a device. But that's not love, that's capitalism!

Kathleen sighed.

Johan: Well then Kathleen, what's your idea about love?

Mopping his brow, Johan took a seat.

Kathleen: Well, love is definitely different from a service provided by a device. To suggest a robot could offer a reasonable, cost-efficient substitute for love and care between humans! Like capitalism suggests we can have love buying soap and toothpaste or freedom buying cigarettes and cars. Capitalism sells symbols all the time. However, using soap is not like real love at all. Meaningful interaction... in your dreams! A machine cannot love, cannot give love, cannot receive it. By definition.

Johan: I don't see why not.

Kathleen: Isn't that obvious? It has no heart. No emotions. No subjectivity. So there is no reciprocity in the relationship with the ladies in the film. Alice and her algorithms can only simulate some typical expressions of loving attention. But reciprocity of feelings is essential for love and

friendship. Aristotle said so, long ago in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to him, that's why human friendship is not possible with things and animals, nor with unwilling persons.

Johan: Alice simulates, this is true. And indeed the women project intentions and emotions onto her. But that's not important. You can't deny that their feelings of friendship were real. Hard to see the use of Aristotle here. He hadn't seen Alice yet! She's not unwilling, little Alice. Quite the contrary. And don't we, as humans, simulate and project emotions most of the time?

Kathleen: We do so indeed. But isn't it hypocritical to simulate friendship towards others? Those friendships will die, they aren't satisfying. Instead you should ask why these women accepted this at all. The story merely reveals their despair – it is desperate loneliness that makes them cling to the surrogate. Akin to a bad marriage.

Johan: Desperate? I'd say they showed an open, curious attitude. They were almost playful.

Kathleen: Don't be a fool. Of course they knew the contact was fake. It's like being really hungry and finally succumbing to a burger. In utter despair we develop warm feelings even for a burger. It satisfies your hunger for a second. But that's poverty, not the good life. It's a technical fix.

Johan: It's a fix indeed, so what? Why make the subject more complicated than necessary? Don't you see it's just a practical question? The problem of love – the lack of it – can be satisfactorily solved. Wouldn't it be heartless callous to not help the lonely with the means we have?

Kathleen (eye-rolls): Oh, but love isn't that simple! Again, love and empathy aren't simple needs, that's a mistake. You must have heard about my *Manifesto against Sex Robots*. I guess that's the reason you invited me to this premiere. I have warned against the development of robots for sex and companionship as they will further reduce human empathy. Needs can be instrumentalised, they can be fulfilled more effectively by technical means. But love is an art. Erich will affirm this, won't you Erich?"

While the old philosopher next to her nodded, Kathleen returned to her seat. Erich cleared his throat; he hadn't spoken for years.

Erich: It's in fact the message of my most popular book, *The Art of Loving*. But let me first thank you, Johan, for inviting me to this premiere, even though you knew I'm not a fan of automatons in general. In the past I have frequently pointed out that humans would become robots in the future, due to our misleading ideas about love. I have pointed out that we would become sleepwalkers instead of truly living from the centre of our existence. Now, 60 years later, it seems I wasn't completely off track.

The problem with love is not how to receive love, as you assume. Instead it is about developing one's capacity for loving. Love is a lifelong question. We need to develop our capacities to give and

receive love. If we want to love we must proceed in the same way we need to proceed if we want to learn any other art such as music, painting or medicine.

Kathleen: Exactly! Love and empathy are skills. They can only be maintained and trained by experiences with mutual, loving relationships.

Johan: Love is a skill? Love is an art? Interesting. But then, do new-borns have to be skilled to experience the love of their parents? Don't they just need to have it?

Kathleen: Oh no, that's different! Of course the parents need skills to care of their child. It's only in human contact that we learn to treat each other as subjects. To love is not a given, you have to learn it from childhood. You learn not to treat the other as an object; that you can't just impose your will. You have to experience that the other is vulnerable and has limits. And that you need consent from the other before sharing intimacy. Getting to know the other takes time and subtle attunement. It can only take place between subjects.

Johan: So, following your argument, if we indeed need skills to experience love, why not train these skills with a social robot like Alice?

Kathleen: Haven't I been clear enough? If you replace a human by a bot, the other human learns to use an object, however ingeniously the latter might simulate subjectiveness. It's incomparable to interaction between two subjects. We have a power dynamic with machines: the relationship is instrumental and not reciprocal. One might even get used to that instrumentality and treat humans in the same anti-social manner. A frightening thought! As soon as Alice's clients get used to interacting with her, they are tempted to behave less respectfully to humans.

Johan: Your last conclusion, that's just a wild guess!

Erich: Stop quarreling you both. How can we talk about love if it's not in a loving way? Now Johan had an interesting thought. Let me rephrase it. *What can we learn about love from interacting with robots like Alice?* If it's not respect, then what else?

Then **Sherry**, a professor of science & society studies, raised her voice:

- Thank you for this intervention Erich. Now we're really getting started. However, the answer is not obvious at all. The three of you just put forward a rather clear-cut notion of love. Whilst watching the documentary, I wondered whether Alice wouldn't just mock and blur these entrenched notions of friendship and love. Time and again, other new technologies have proven to be strong drivers for stretching moral concepts. In most cases, new technologies shed new light on essential aspects of who we are. It will be no different with carebots.

Sherry paused and looked around, as if lecturing.

- Biotechnology challenged the concept of life and organ transplants caused a new concept of 'death', brain death. Industry robotisation transformed the concept of work and medical technology

has changed what health means. So why wouldn't social robotics challenge current ideas and norms of love and care? And why would that be a problem? Isn't this what culture is all about? Social robots will change what we mean by reciprocity, love, care, intimacy and sex. They might have already done so. Love will prove to be a floating concept.

Erich: Indeed, ideas about what it means to love change over time. In fact, these ideas have already changed a lot since I wrote my book in 1956. After that, we had a sexual revolution and norms on sexual behaviour and marriage changed drastically. And today developments such as internet dating rapidly enforce a practice of finding partners guided by market principles. Meanwhile the old idea of love as an active and giving attitude – presuming self-knowledge, responsibility and courage – has sorely disintegrated in western society. We have become alienated from this profound idea of love as a practice and an art.

I think Alice perfectly fits the popular misconception that the experience of love should come from the outside. As if the other being should give us love, instead of love being a personal capacity we have to develop within ourselves. The disintegration of love is of course not due to robotisation. In fact the opposite is true: the whole idea of a robot like Alice coming up seems the ultimate consequence of a dramatically changed climate, the climate of forgetfulness about our most human faculty.

Sherry: Dear Erich, I belong to your most loyal admirers. You may however have misunderstood my point. I truly doubt whether our new practice of robot love can already be judged, as you suggest. We don't know how it will work out yet. You speak about alienation, as if there is a clear-cut norm for how to judge these developments we have been alienated from; some sort of timeless ideal of 'true love'. But no, I very much doubt that we'd have such a norm. Norms will change too, together with the practice.

Erich: Indeed my idea is that the forms in which we experience love, such as marriage, can be changed over time. But in the end, the essence of love will remain unalterable.

Johan: The essence of love is unalterable... It sounds really wonderful! A bit abstract as well. For if a robot can't help them, what is your solution for the lonely ones? Will unalterable, eternal love help them out? A course in spirituality? I still haven't heard any tangible solution from you philosophers. Do we have to tell these elderly people find the love in themselves through contemplation? That seems a rather rude ...

Kathleen: How rude is it to impose carebots on them and not search for real solutions?

Johan (fingers used as quotation marks): How would you define such a "real solution", dear Kathleen?

Kathleen: You should first ask: what exactly *is* the problem? Who defined it? That's crucial. Was it the experts? Or was it the outcome of political deliberation that included many views? At the start

of our conversation, you postulated the deplorable social circumstances of these ladies as a given. As if it's a fact of nature that they're lonely. But let's be fair, their loneliness is not a natural fact. It is the direct outcome of our social policies that marginalise the old and helpless. It's a political fact, not a natural disaster.

Instead of creating a technical fix that aggravates their separation, why not think about a social fix? About designing a world in which the elderly are part of the world, not excluded? Where people have time to care for each other? Why hide them away in their ugly flats, far away from their friends and children, far away from the liveliness of the streets, far away from the stream of life?

Johan: That would of course be lovely. You are a true romantic. It's of course not realistic at all. It would be totally unaffordable.

Sherry: I'm sorry Johan, affordability is a political choice. With another government, care wouldn't be treated as an object of austerity and cost-efficiency. With another government, care would have had a strong value by itself. Such a government would shape the conditions in which we could better love and care for each other.

Kathleen (sighing again): I knew you would finally agree with me Sherry.

Sherry: Not yet dear! Not as long as you continue to juxtapose social and technical solutions. You're suggesting that carebots will automatically work out in a dehumanising way; as though technology is not part of what makes us human as well. Let me ask you, Kathleen: could you imagine technologies that would enforce practices of love and care? And if so, under which conditions?

Kathleen: For mastering the art of loving, we must learn to know ourselves. And most of all love ourselves.

Johan: Oh dear... here we go again.

Kathleen: Fine. Then let me be clear Johan: I want to design a world which the elderly are explicitly part of and in which no one is excluded. A world in which people have time to care for each other. Of course we also need technology for that world: we need tables, hearing aids, Zimmer frames, homes with small gardens and shops nearby. I doubt we'll need carebots in such a world. Carebots will divide instead of unite us.

Erich: Couldn't social robots have a role in this quest for knowing who we are? Maybe they could reflect our behaviour back at us better than humans of flesh and blood?

As if catalysed by this last sentence the young actor **Phi** bounced from his chair:

- Flesh and blood! So far, none of your stories have shown any vivid experience with loving robots, you only talk and theorise! As if we'd find love with the right thoughts about it. But isn't love all about acting, about doing the right thing, about a will to love? Well, I did have an intense love affair

with a lifelike robotic doll. I can tell you about the flesh and the blood. For six months, I did a theatre tour with Renée, a beautiful, artificial girl with sexy curves. I bought her for 6,000 dollars from an American website so I could explore the possibilities and limitations of building a relationship with her on stage. Now Johan just stated that Alice satisfies the need for meaningful contact and then Kathleen and Erich feared that love was degraded to a commodity. Since our play I know it's exactly the other way round. I was a man with a doll, just a doll, I know. But the unreal can be very real at the same time. Renée did not return a syllable, nor a smile or a wink, but she perfectly mirrored my projections. My desire, my loneliness, my feelings of self-rejection. All of a sudden, I realised it was all about the projection of the love inside of me. In the end, my off stage girlfriend admitted she was happy that I had had this experience. Renée had changed me significantly. She made me more tender and less greedy. I feel grateful having had a relation with her. I wish any one of you could have that experience.

Johan: So?

Phi widened his eyes. The flautist player silently rolled across the carpet, carrying a mirror this time and suddenly started talking.

Flautist: Stop conversing for a minute please! I've endured this for some time now and I get fed up of being silenced and treated like a servant. And on top of that, Phi is telling you that I just mirrored his projections. I regret to hear this. I had the impression that we had overcome our separateness for some time. Now, if you don't mind, I'll carry on playing.

Disclaimer: Only the author is responsible for the content of this fictional dialogue. The characters in the script are only very loosely based on real persons and their original statements.

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