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Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked?

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1

Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked?

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN

Could you have a romantic relationship with a *computer*? What if you knew (or even merely suspected) that it was *programmed* to show a romantic interest in you? Would that suspicion undermine any feeling you might have of being desired *as you*?

What if your soulmate died and you were offered an *indistinguishable copy* to replace them—would you be delighted, or would that just creep you out?

Suppose that you're having sex with someone while fantasizing about having sex with someone *else*, while at the same time that someone else is fantasizing about having sex with *you*. (Never mind explaining *that* to the someone you'll soon be spooning with). With whom are you, *in fact*, having sex?

What are we really, deep down, searching for when we seek and enter into intimate relationships? And why am I asking you such strange questions?

The Best Movies Begin after You've Left the Theater

Watching *Blade Runner 2049*, especially on the big screen, it's easy to become totally immersed in the spectacle of it all. From the visually stunning panoramic opening shot of a world denuded of the natural, to its haunting soundtrack, to its rust-orange-saturated depiction of a Las Vegas in ruins, it's quite a banquet for the eyes and ears.

The movie is also filled with striking characters, memorable dialogue, and some very cool technology. But at its core, it's really a film about the *heart* that invites us to reflect on the

nature of intimate relations—especially romance, sex, and love. What unites these distinct but often confusingly intertwined experiences?

Happy Anniversary!

Let's take "romance" here to refer to any freely-chosen *relationship* involving mutual attraction to, and a desire to experience physical and emotional intimacy with, another person, along with efforts to please the other person, enhance their attraction to oneself, and thereby (we hope) bring about such intimacy.

Ironically, the most "fleshed out" (so to speak) romance in 2049 is between K and Joi—the latter being an advanced AI (artificial intelligence) system marketed by the Wallace Corporation as a customizable digital companion. Enhanced with a holographic avatar, her every action seems intended to please K—for instance, by asking him about his day, making him "dinner," changing her appearance to suit his mood, or encouraging his growing belief that he is "special."

K and Joi use pet names for each other ("honey" and "baby-sweet"), as sweethearts might. K is obviously quite smitten with Joi; we never see him alone at home when he doesn't choose to make her present as well. It also seems obvious that he wants to please her. He spends the hard-earned bonus money he garnered by retiring Sapper Morton on a special "anniversary" (even though he admits it isn't!) present—an "emanator" device that permits Joi to go anywhere, including the rooftop terrace of his apartment building where they share a tender moment—until, that is, he receives an incoming call that, um, rains on their special time together.

Whether Joi experiences, or even *could* experience, a romantic attraction to K is obviously a more difficult question. In fact, there are at least a couple of reasons to doubt that she does, both stemming from her basic nature as artificial intelligence.

To begin with, entering into a romantic relationship seems to require, at a minimum, that you be a *person*. The seventeenth-century English philosopher (and lover of commas) John Locke famously defined a "person" as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places."

But is Joi *really* a "thinking intelligent being"? Granted, she behaves *as if* she is one; and maybe if an AI system behaves *as if* it is thinking, then it really *is* thinking. What else could we reasonably want or demand? Heck, how could I know that

Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked?**5**

you're really a “thinking intelligent being” except by observing your behavior? On the other hand, perhaps Joi’s designers are just really good at fooling their customers, and us. Perhaps the best that a mere computer can do is *mimic* the sorts of behavior that we normally associate with a first-person, subjective experience like feeling romantic interest. Whether a being like Joi could possess the characteristics required for being a person, and for feeling romantic attraction, is at present simply impossible to say.

Second, because entering into a romantic relationship is a *choice*, we might suppose that possessing *free will* is a requirement for both partners. Yet there are reasons to wonder whether Joi is truly free. In towering advertisements, “joi” is marketed as providing “everything you want to see, everything you want to hear.” K’s “joi” has been customized by him to approximate his ideal of feminine beauty, to provide a sense of domestic quasi-normalcy, perhaps even to bolster his self-esteem (which, frankly, needs a lot of help).

She certainly *seems* attracted to him; but it’s hard not to wonder whether that’s just a basic feature of her programming. But that’s not all. In a bona fide romantic relationship you have to *believe* that the other person is sincerely expressing their feelings, not just parroting words they’ve been programmed to repeat. If my computer has been programmed to flash the message, “Well, hello there, handsome!” whenever it boots up, I’m not likely to feel flattered and desired (despite knowing that it speaks the truth). Now, if Joi’s expressions of romantic interest in K are simply a function of her programming, she hasn’t freely chosen K at all; and to the extent that K knows or even suspects that this is the case, it may be difficult for him to rise to the occasion with authentic feelings. Talk about an *anti*-aphrodisiac!

From another perspective, though, this might be setting the bar too high. After all, *we* enter into romantic relationships, yet it is not self-evident that *we* possess the sort of robust free will we might suppose is required. No one knows for sure whether “determinism” (roughly, the thesis that all events, including all human actions, are causally necessitated) is true. Perhaps determinism *is* true, as many philosophers believe. Well, if *they* can still get weak-kneed at the sight of their beloveds, why can’t Joi? (Ignore the fact that her knees are merely holographic.) Then again, perhaps determinism is false. Perhaps, thanks to our large, wrinkled brains we are (somehow) able to escape from the chains of necessity. Maybe Joi manages a similar feat. 2049 screenwriter Hampton Fancher says that

although Joi's responses *are* programmed, nevertheless through her attachment to K she "escapes her own . . . digital limitations." Now *there's* a thought. Love wins!

The Joi of Sex

Let's think about sex. (Perhaps you already were.) Here's a seemingly straightforward claim: Joi hires Mariette, a replicant prostitute to whom she thinks K is sexually attracted, so that he can have sex with her. Right. But *which* "her" does he have sex with?

It depends. Look up "sex" in the dictionary (maybe you already did this once to try to figure out what all the fuss was about) and you'll find a hodge-podge of different definitions (complicated by the fact that living things from microbes to magistrates do it) that are not easy to reconcile.

Fortunately, we don't need to. For our purposes, let "sex" be any physical activity aimed at achieving *union* with someone else. A notion akin to this idea has an ancient pedigree. In his *Symposium* (a dramatic account of a drinking party in which the guests, in various states of inebriation, vie with one another to praise *Eros*—erotic love), Plato recounts the ancient Greek mythic explanation of sexual desire. According to the myth, each human being originally had four arms and four legs, one head with two faces looking in opposite directions, and two sets of sexual organs. Such primordial people could walk upright as we do, or (when they were late for work) could use all eight arms and legs to propel themselves along at great speed—like an octopus on amphetamines doing cartwheels.

Fearing that such powerful creatures might one day challenge his supremacy, Zeus divided each one down the middle, in the process creating a race of beings who would forever long to be physically reunited with their other half. Now, while I wouldn't want to vouch for the truth of this wonderful story in *all* respects, it does nicely convey the poignant human longing for *physical union* with that part of ourselves that feels missing.

In a physical sense, it seems obvious that K has sex with Mariette. After all, K physically interacts (and unites, in a sense) with *her* body. But that's not the only way we could look at it. Mackenzie Davis, the actor who plays Mariette, says that "Mariette has this strange out-of-body experience when Joi hires her as a sex surrogate. As a hologram, she [that is, Joi] can superimpose herself upon Mariette to have an actual sexual relationship with K." According to this view, it is *Joi* who

Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked? 7

has sex with K despite the fact that she lacks a physical body, human or otherwise.

This is certainly odd, but nonetheless is close to the view that some philosophers take—whether they realize it or not. *Substance dualists* maintain that human beings consist of two parts: a body and a mind (or maybe a soul). In this view, the mind or soul is (somehow) *in* the body. The *former* is the *person*; the latter is merely a “vehicle” of sorts that the person uses while in an embodied state. Consequently, if two people have sex, their bodies are merely the instruments by which those persons (minds or souls) have sex. Mariette’s body would then be merely a proxy by which the person who is Joi can have sex with the person who is K.

Alternatively, we could adopt a view inspired by recent developments in cognitive neuroscience (but harkening back to an idea of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant) and note that all of our conscious experiences of the external world are like a form of “controlled hallucination” arising from the brain’s attempt to gain a predictive toehold over incoming sensory information. We may *perceive* our bodies as part of the external world, but if this “predictive processing” view is right, it is more accurate to say that (as experienced) our bodies exist solely in our minds.

Regardless of what you think of these ideas (and you could be forgiven if you feel the need to lie down for a while), they would tend to diminish any difference between K and Joi’s rather unusual sexual encounter and more run-of-the-mill human sex. All sex, in these two views, is fundamentally a person-to-person conscious connection using physical bodies, or mental representations of physical bodies, as mere (albeit perhaps necessary) intermediaries. The same would be true for K and Mariette, who also meet the conditions for personhood, in which case there would be *three* persons having sex together. You have to admit, two replicants and an AI certainly makes one of the more memorable *ménages à trois* in the history of cinema!

What Happens if I Finish This?

Then there’s Lt. Joshi. The shooting script for *2049* describes her as “a 50ish woman. Ambitious, officious, impatient. K’s backtalk gives fuel to her irritation so she tolerates it. Or maybe she just likes the look of him. More than she should.” We see subtle evidence of this when she pays an unexpected visit to his apartment, and pours herself a drink. “I’ve known a lot of your kind. All useful but . . . No wonder with you I sometimes forget.” A half-finished bottle later, she is “whatever comes past

tipsy,” gazes at him, “a little too long” (as the script says), then at the bottle, then back at him: “What happens if I finish this?”

She knows that she can order him to have sex with her, and that he’ll have to comply. But she doesn’t. That would be to have a more intimate connection with him, but not one based on reciprocity. As she confided to him moments before in a rare, unguarded moment, “We’re all just looking out for something real.” She leaves. This scene is revealing. Lt. Joshi is normally all business. Focused. Professional. Tough as nails. But deep down she, too, longs for an *authentic* human connection, “for something real.”

Don’t You Love Me?

An old movie title proclaims that “love is a many-splendored thing.” Indeed it is. So it might seem foolhardy to try to offer a concise definition that captures love’s many meanings. But we need *some* characterization to guide our discussion. Science fiction writer Robert Heinlein’s definition expresses, I think, a key insight: “Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own.”

That seems right. But we can narrow it down further by noting that *romantic love* is also an *emotion* marked by special affection for a specific person because of what are perceived to be their uniquely-realized romantically-desirable attributes.

Deckard loves Rachael in this sense. Although in *Blade Runner* we never witness him verbally expressing his love for her, it becomes evident in *2049* that he did love her and continued to cherish her memory for almost thirty years after her death. He keeps a framed photo of her. He’s visibly shaken when Wallace tempts him with an ersatz “Rachael,” and is deeply moved by seeing Rachael’s skull. Although we’re given few details of their brief time together, every indication is that Deckard’s love for Rachael was both genuine and enduring.

Her Eyes Were Green

Which brings us back to that scene just mentioned. Why does Deckard reject Wallace’s striking offer of “An angel. Made again. For you”? The reason he gives—“Her eyes were green”—seems to imply that he rejects the offer because this new “Rachael” is not an exact enough copy of the original. But that can’t be right, because as everyone who has seen *Blade Runner* knows, Rachael’s eyes were *brown*. Suppose, however, purely for the sake of argument, that Rachael’s eyes *were* green, and that Wallace had responded: “Dang. Got that part wrong. Wait

Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked? 9

right here while we manufacture another one with green eyes.” Would Deckard have changed his mind? It seems unlikely. So, we need to consider other explanations.

We know that Wallace was dangling this ersatz “Rachael” in front of Deckard to entice him to divulge information concerning the whereabouts of his daughter, whom Wallace wants to dissect so that he can discover the secret of replicant procreation. No doubt Deckard was unwilling to barter his daughter’s life in exchange for a carrot, and was throwing Wallace’s attempted bribe back in his face, telling him, in effect: “I can’t be bought.” Perhaps it was his way of saying, “You may be a genius, but you’re not as powerful or as skilled as you think you are.”

All that might be true. But there is another possibility as well. I can imagine Deckard rejecting Wallace’s offer even if it didn’t require him to divulge any information about his daughter’s location, and even if the replacement “Rachael” was physically indistinguishable from the original, and even (for good measure) had implanted memories of their previous time together. I think that Deckard realized that no matter how physically and even psychologically *indistinguishable* from the original this new “Rachael” might be, it could never *be* the original, and therefore would always, necessarily, lack something essential, something crucial. But we’re supposing that this new “Rachael” is physically and psychologically indistinguishable from the original. What, then, could she be missing?

Did You Miss Me?

A criminal mastermind creates a forgery of the *Mona Lisa*—one so accurate down to the last detail that even the world’s foremost art experts cannot identify it as a fake. Then, in the dead of night, he breaks into the Louvre in Paris, manages to circumvent the museum’s elaborate security systems, removes the *Mona Lisa*, and replaces it with the copy. Visitors to the museum the next day have no idea that they’re looking at a clever forgery. The pleasure they experience in viewing the forgery is no different than it would be if they were viewing the original. Why would it be?

Now, suppose that you were among those visitors, and that you *knew* what had transpired the night before. You would know that something important—indeed, something essential—was missing from the Louvre. But it wouldn’t be anything you could see or detect with your senses because, after all, the painting on the wall is supposed to be completely indistinguishable from the original. What would be missing is, of

course, the Mona Lisa *itself*—the particular object that once rested on an easel in Leonardo da Vinci’s studio, felt the impress of his brush, and is hundreds of years old. Those properties contribute to it being the unique work of art that it is—one that can be *replicated*, but never *recreated*.

Deckard may have understood that, in this regard at least, Rachael was like the Mona Lisa. Wallace didn’t grasp that it wasn’t a replicable cluster of abstract “Rachael properties” that was the object of Deckard’s enduring love. It was the singular, special, irreplaceable person, *Rachael*. Sadly, once that was person was gone, she was never again—forever. Eldon Tyrell was more right than he knew when he told Deckard, “Rachael is special.” She was. We all are.

Do You Long for Having Your Heart Interlinked?

The baseline test in *2049* is intended to detect any developing emotional reactions blade runners might have to the violent work they have been created to do. Seemingly random questions are aggressively hurled at K from an ominous, unseen interrogator. “Have you ever been in an institution?” “Do they keep you in a cell?” Each time K stoically responds: “Cells.” Gradually, however, the nature of the questions shifts: “What is it like to hold the hand of someone you love?” “Did they teach you how to feel, finger to finger?” “Do you long for having your heart interlinked?” “Do you dream about being interlinked?” Now K responds to each question: “Interlinked.”

“Constant K” has passed another baseline test, but at a price. Cells are by their very nature distinct, bounded, separate things. To be “interlinked,” however, is to be connected to others while retaining one’s individuality. Evidently, K is still a “cell” at this point in the film. Later, however, he fails the test and is forced to flee. He has found himself, or has chosen to become, intimately interlinked with others, and that profound internal change cannot elude detection.

We’re not so different from Lt. Joshi, K, Deckard, and even Joi. Romance, sex, and love are all expressions of a fundamental human desire to overcome our sense of isolation as distinct, lonely, conscious cells of awareness and feelings. They speak to something deep, and precious, within us. At the end of the day, and at the end of the movie, we *all* long for having our hearts interlinked.¹

¹ Many thanks to the editors of this volume for helpful comments on earlier drafts.