Kurt Medley

CSF - Seminar

Paper Response 2: Alone Together

Having frequently pondered the idea of artificial intelligence being a viable usurper to human cognition, intelligence, and interaction, I was delighted to get started reading *Alone Together*. Soon after realizing that Sherry Turkle employed dizzying amounts of empirical statistics relating to the subjects she wished to address, I immediately changed my opinion.

It seemed to me as if the topic of robotics implemented in mainstream society as replacements for human interaction were inherently negative until I began my own thought process. Sherry expresses her anxiety toward a robotic future in a myriad of ways. In chapter 5, we see the conclusion of what it means to "develop" friendship amongst humans, according to Sherry. "I believe that sociable technology will always disappoint because it promises what it cannot deliver. It promises friendship but can only deliver performances" (Tuckle 101). Sherry is of course referring to the inability of robots to establish meaningful relationships with humans because the idea is infeasible. Circuitry and programming cannot replicate "real" human emotion. Amongst her test subjects, who are all children ranging in the age of 5 to 13, Sherry confirms her worst fears are beginning to surface: "When Madison felt joyful in Kismet's 'affection,' I could not be glad. I felt in the shadow of an experiment, just beginning, in which humans are the subjects" (101).

I cannot help but wonder what prompted Sherry to examine a range of children as an empirical study and not a group of adults to draw her conclusion of an eventual "disconnected" dystopia of humans having disconcerted feelings towards each other in regard to their instinctual propensity to develop friendship and companionship with one another. If Sherry's control group would have been comprised of older children, say teenagers, I believe she wouldn't have the same opinion about the steering of the populace into a socially inept state of being. Sherry seems to dread a child's primitive interpretation of love, friendship, and kinship after interaction with a incredibly sophisticated piece of machinery. The developmental state of humans during infancy up until adulthood change drastically from year to year. I'd say its unfair to throw technology in the gutter based on these responses. Children often interpret things incorrectly, as they should, because they are coming to terms with reality over the course of maturing with age. Children imagine things to be true that aren't, and things that are untrue to be true. This is part of the developmental phase of the human being. It is a largely imaginative state. Setting a complex piece of machinery in front of a developing human is going to produce varying results. Sherry argues that the level of compassion shown by each individual test subject's surrounding family/friends determines their relative need of affection by robots. Whether the child interprets Cog/Kismet's reaction as positive or negative gives insight onto the child's family life.

I definitely encourage family interaction and human development amongst caring and compassionate individuals. Relatives are amongst the most responsible for the affection given onto a child. To think that a child may someday may enjoy preference to a robotic interaction is an insult to human intuition and cognition.

The only feasible way a human, having come into their adult years, could prefer interaction with a robot over another human being is if a robot was an exact replica of a human being. Their behavior would have to mimic precisely the human interpretation of environment - especially their interaction with an inquisitive human. This, I believe, is the path our species is heading toward. Soon, androids with human-esque properties will litter the earth, fooling humans with fake “feelings” of love, hate, happiness, etc. The difference is the resentment an artificial “feeling” induces. I have a strong inclination to believe that humans form a kinship that is impenetrable by advances in technology. Mimicking an emotion via programming can only bring about a certain level of attachment.

Sherry brings herself into the MIT laboratories and admits that she, herself was competing for the attention of the Cog robot’s visual sensory projection. This apparently made an impression on Sherry, and she was somehow incapable of distinguishing the robot’s mechanically programmed response to color and the neurological response of her fellow human’s reaction to her presence.

As with most sociologic topics written by aspiring “human” authors, I find this one to be cheapened considerably by the lack of distinction made between variables that make a considerable difference in interpretation. Sherry’s robo-phobia had no affect on my opinion of the role of robotics in society and I will continue to be a proponent of their implementation into a world where human’s remain cognizant of the differences between robotic mechanism and human emotion.