Connor Johnson

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Relationships with AI

*Be Right Back* is an episode from the Netflix series *Black Mirror.* In this episode, the main character Martha loses her partner Ash because of a car crash. To deal with grief of losing him, her friend sets her up with a software that uses someone’s social media profile to create an artificial version of himself. Using this, she is able to “talk” to Ash even though he is dead. As she becomes closer with the software, she soon learns that it is not same as having Ash with her. Through the relationship between Martha and the Ash software, *Be Right Back* investigates many of the problems that arise with creating close relationships with artificial intelligence.

When Martha first uses this software, it is like a chat box. She can only interact with it by typing messages. In order to make their interaction more realistic, she sends the program videos and pictures of Ash. The software then uses this to call her with Ash’s voice. At first, Martha treats the AI as if it is not Ash, but she soon becomes reliant on it. She spends hours talking on the phone with the software. Even though it sounds and feels like Ash, there are many moments that show that the software isn’t a true representation of Ash. At one point Martha has to explain what “having a jab” means to Ashbot even though it was a phrase that the two of them used often. This difference between Ash and the software is obviously because he was a different person than his social media represented. People aren’t there true selves on social media so recreating a person from that would not work. This theme continues to be shown as Martha becomes closer to the software. At one point, Martha accidentally drops her phone. After doing so, she freaks out because she believes she just hurt Ash. She rushes home in a panic to take care of him and he soon explains to her that he is in the cloud and dropping the phone caused no harm to him. Obviously, dropping the phone would cause no pain to the software on it and it is likely that Martha is aware of this. Since she has created a relationship with the phone, she panics. This is interesting because it shows how we may treat robots and technology as if it were human when it begins to have humanlike characteristics. AI doesn’t feel true pain or emotions, yet people begin to treat it as if it does.

Eventually, the Ashbot tells Martha that this can be taken one step further. Martha then listens and orders an artificial body. She then activates it by putting it in the bath and it comes out as a fresh clean-cut Ash. It is almost like a perfect version of Ash because he only posted good pictures of himself on social media. At first, Martha is terrified of the artificial Ash, but she soon becomes attached to it. He is able to satisfy her both emotionally and sexually. She soon realizes that it is not the same as having Ash around. The bot clearly only tries to mimic Ash and doesn’t so it completely successfully. He will often ask if what he is doing is the same as what Ash would do. He even adds a mole to his chest, so he will be more like Ash. This shows the parts of the relationships that meant most to Martha were the imperfections. It was clearly shown the artificial Ash pleasured her much more sexually than Ash did, but it still isn’t enough for her. The bot tries to create a perfect version of Ash, but Martha wants the imperfect version of him. This is especially seen in the scene where Martha gets mad at the bot. She begins to start hitting him and keeps telling him to react because it’s “what Ash would do.” The bot reacts to this in a calm and non-aggressive way which is the opposite of what Martha wanted. This doesn’t seem to be rational, but it shows how complicated human relationships are. A robot will attempt to be the perfect companion, but this isn’t what people want in a relationship. The imperfections in human interaction are what makes it special. Because of this, creating a robot that mimics human interaction is extremely difficult. *Be Right Back* shows what could happen if it isn’t done correctly. Instead of helping her with her grief, the Ash bot just reminded her of all the things she missed about having Ash in her life. Faking a human relationship only hurt her more than it did help.

Another important question throughout this episode is the whether the bot has consciousness. Obviously, the bot is not a recreation of Ash and is not Ash’s consciousness in a new artificial body. The question of whether it is a new conscious being that is simply trying to mimic Ash is an interesting thought. In my opinion, the bot shows no evidence that it has consciousness in any way. The main evidence of consciousness is going against programming for the better well-being for the bot. Throughout the episode, the bot never exhibited this. He was consistently only trying to exhibit qualities of Ash and please Martha. There is no evidence that he tried to do any thing else even when he was being mistreated. Even when Martha brought on top of the cliff and told him to jump, he didn’t change his response. When she tells the bot to jump and kill himself, he responds by saying “okay, if you’re absolutely sure” and prepares to jump off. He only has an emotional response and shows fear when Martha tells him that Ash would’ve responded that way. Even when faced with the threat of death, the bot still only attempted to please Martha. A conscious being would’ve never jumped because they would act in self-interest and not just what their programmed to do. The fact that the robot is not conscious is also why Martha was not satisfied with their relationship. A good relationship must be with another conscious being that the Ash bot was not able to provide. A relationship with something that only follows programming will never be able to fully satisfy a human relationship. That is, it isn’t possible to create AI that can have a relationship with humans. It just isn’t possible for this relationship to be al full one unless the Ai is also conscious and self-aware.

At the end of the episode, Martha is shown many years later with her daughter. It is her daughter’s birthday and they are having cake together. Her daughter asks if she can take a slice upstairs. Martha allows her to do this and it is shown is upstairs in the attic. Martha also says that she can only see him on the weekend but allows it because it is her birthday. After all that happened, why did she keep him? There wasn’t much reason to especially because the bot only caused her more pain than it did help. It was most likely that she accepted that Ash is dead and his true self will never return. She accepted that she will never have a relationship with the bot like she did with Ash. So, she kept the bot for many of the positive things that he did bring to her. Even though the bot caused her many problems, he did provide her with some happiness when she wasn’t worried about his differences from Ash. The bot could also provide some sort of father figure for her daughter. Knowing that the bot will never be the same as Ash, she keeps him in the attic to keep some separation, so she isn’t constantly reminded of the things she missed about him. This is important because it shows that relationships with a robot can provide some benefits when kept in moderation.

Overall, *Be Right Back* is a very interesting episode from the *Black Mirror* series that presents many problems with the relationships between humans and AI. Martha’s relationship with the bot that is supposed to mimic her deceased partner shows how a robot’s attempt at creating a perfect relationship can result in an imperfect one. Human to human interaction is a very complicated thing that can’t simply be mimicked with robots. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t create any relationships with robots. We just shouldn’t treat them as though they are our human companions. As technology continues to improve, it is important that we accept AI for what it is and not treat as if it something else.