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Critical Review Essay: How Has AI Made Us Reevaluate What it Means to Be Human?

If I were to ask most people, “What makes you human?” they would likely scoff at the unassuming and seemingly simple question. However, as we have developed computers and artificial intelligence that has become more and more human-like, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate ourselves from our creations. This is especially true when humans and computers interact with each other in virtual environments where the obvious physical differences are not apparent. It has become easier than ever to be fooled into thinking an online chatbot is a real person and many are designed specifically to make you think that way. This can lead to a mistrust and turning away from technology that has the potential to help many people and better our everyday lives. I believe in order to use this technology responsibly we must draw a strict distinguishing line between us and the technology we’ve created. This re-defining what it means to be human can also help us live more intentional and compassionate lives, embracing and even enhancing our own humanity. While computers may be able to beat chess champions or write hundreds of lines of code, humans differentiate ourselves through our ability to form genuine connections, show empathy to one another through the shared human experience, and use our perception, creativity, and intuition to develop new ideas and solve nuanced problems.

In *The Most Human Human: What Artificial Intelligence Teaches Us About Being Alive*, Brian Christian explores what sets humans apart from machines as he tries to pass Alan Turing’s famous Turing Test. Not only does Christian need to convince an anonymous human judge that

he is human and not a machine, but he is also striving to be awarded the title of the “most human human.” When Turing first developed his imitation game in 1949, the idea that a computer would be able to imitate a human interaction was almost laughable. However, today, millions of people send messages to ChatGPT every day. A friend of mine recently sent me a New York Times article describing how a woman even fell in love with a personalized version of ChatGPT. This seems quite absurd to me even today and I can imagine it would have been outside of Alex Turing’s wildest imagination 70 years ago. With the rapid advance of technology and artificial intelligence, it is increasingly difficult to predict what our relationships with computers will look like decades in the future. Nevertheless, I believe that today’s technology lacks certain innately human characteristics that allow us to form genuine connections with one another.

I believe that one of our most unique capabilities as humans is the ability to empathize with the human experience, something that a computer might be able to emulate in the future but can never fully obtain. If a computer were given the ability to respond to human users with empathy, it would be the work of a human programmer and training programs based on human interactions. No AI could simply develop this complex human emotion on its own. This AI would use formulas to regurgitate human-like responses based on the input from the user. However, I would hope these responses wouldn’t feel the same coming from a computer as it would coming from another human. Someone with sufficient human interaction and emotionally complex relationships should be able to distinguish from this fabricated display of empathy. Christian delves into the use of artificial intelligence as a form of therapy for patients with less severe mental health issues. This could help expand the availability of therapy information and exercises to potential patients who wouldn’t otherwise have access to it. However, I don’t believe a computer could ever replace the human relationship that is formed between a patient and a

therapist over months of sessions. A human therapist is able to take context from previous conversations and provide advice and reassurance that they've learned through formal training and arguably more importantly, their own life experiences.

Another trait that sets us apart as uniquely human is a perceptiveness to keen details and subtleties, as well as our ability to evaluate holistic processes and systems. Christian describes how unlike most animals, we can follow where other people are looking with their eyes rather than their heads and bodies. This made me think about the subtle differences in emotions that are shown through people's facial expressions. Most people, especially those with high EQs, are able to distinguish if a friend or family member is mad, upset, or angry just through a furrowed brow or slightly downturned mouth. This perception then creates an emotional response within us which may drive us to respond to the other person's emotion. This comes back to our uniquely human empathy that drives our response. But returning to my original point of perception of small subtleties, this is not currently something that computers are capable of. Furthermore, if this is something AI is designed to do in the future, it won't be able to replicate the accuracy with which we can judge the emotions of someone we're familiar with. There is not a large enough training set to teach AI what "frustrated" or "forlorn" looks like on every human face. A sign of strong and established human relationships is an ability to read the other's emotions, and something that we need to value and utilize more frequently in the new age of technology.

In addition to being able to perceive small subtleties, humans are also able to step back and consider a process or system as a whole. I agree with Christian's argument that many human jobs are made into mechanical, brainless processes before they are taken over by automation and computers. In an effort to streamline and speed up processes, it is easy for companies to treat their employees as cogs in a larger machine. However, Christian offers several examples of

companies where employees are asked for their opinion on improving processes and the success these companies found in giving their employees trust and autonomy. When they are made to think of creative solutions on their own, they are not only using critical thinking and problem solving skills, but “doing that very human thing of simultaneously stepping back and considering the process itself” (Christian 84). My optimistic vision for the future is that rather than get rid of jobs, AI can be used to automate the more mechanical part of human jobs while allowing people to step back and look at the big picture. This could free employees to use their creativity to solve higher level problems in new and improved ways.

While many people have been frightened for years by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, I believe that this new technology has an ever-expanding capacity to do good and even—as Brian Christian argues—to teach us more about what it means to be human. Almost everyone in the world interacts with computers on a daily basis, and some more than they have in-person human interaction. I believe that this has the potential to show us what we are missing from a lack of human interaction. When everyone was isolated and working at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, people began to miss the human connection made from seeing employees or classmates in person. Our only channels of communication were through a screen and were almost always unsatisfactory when compared to the way things used to be. Instead of being afraid of AI becoming more like us, we should find ways to separate ourselves from AI. We should take full advantage of the empathy, perception, creativity, and problem solving skills that make us human, and use them to form real relationships with our fellow humans.