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FRIENDS ARE NOT "ELECTRIC" (CHARACTERS)

A sociologically informed case against human-robot friendships

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Abstract

In recent years, several philosophers have suggested that the sociology of everyday life, especially the work of Erving Goffman, supports the claim that we may enter friendships with robots. I strongly disagree. I conduct a close reading of the sociology of everyday life to evidence this contention. By doing so, I identify a necessary condition of friendship robots cannot satisfy, namely, the honest communication of biographical information. Additionally, I draw attention to two privacy issues friendly-seeming robots will produce. I conclude the contribution by examining how we could use the sociology of everyday life to properly describe why someone may falsely believe they have a robot friend.

All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify. (Goffman, 1959, p.78)

1 INTRODUCTION

I present a sociologically informed case against the possibility of human-robot friendships. Considering that many other researchers have already shown that robots cannot be our friends via more conventional, philosophical means (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2006; Elder, 2015), let me explain why I chose this somewhat unusual method. In recent years, several of my peers working in robot ethics have used the sociology of everyday life – especially the work of Erving Goffman – to argue that we may accurately call a robot our friend if it convincingly behaves like one, even though it is an uncaring, unthinking machine (de Graaf, 2016; Coeckelbergh, 2017; Danaher, 2019a). They imply that the sociological scholarship I just mentioned suggests that being a friend amounts to giving a character performance. According to Goffman (and the researchers he influenced) we can describe many interactions in this manner. Indeed, we can compare our collective understanding of what we should and should not do during social engagements to the techniques different stage actors use to portray the same character.

We often conceal our opinions and emotions during such performances to ensure that we do not upset our audience. The scholars working in robot ethics mentioned in the previous paragraph claim that our friends also behave like this. They complete actions we expect from friends and often do not communicate what they genuinely think or feel to avoid spoiling a performance. These scholars contend that if we accept that a human friend can express falsehoods about their psychological states yet remain our friend, we may say that a mindless robot that "consistently and coherently" (Danaher, 2019a) behaves like such a person is our friend, too. I strongly disagree and will disprove this conclusion by drawing from the sociology of everyday life to show that robots cannot fulfil a necessary condition of friendship, namely, the disclosure of biographical information. To the best of my knowledge, I am the first scholar from robot ethics to describe this necessary condition of friendship and identify it via close reading of the sociological texts referenced throughout this contribution.

To build my case, I chiefly employ sociological research that discusses the information management strategies stigmatized individuals use to evade discrimination. Specifically, I delve into the literature on "passing" – a form of character performance that enables marginalized people to conceal their identities to receive better treatment during interactions. People who practice passing present themselves as members of a dominant group. While doing so, they

cannot openly communicate biographical facts associated with their stigmatized identities without potentially outing themselves. Crucially, for my argument, they tend to deliberately stop passing to enter friendships. When a gay man, who otherwise passes as straight, willingly tells someone about his experiences being gay we can safely assume he wishes to relate to them as a friend. He tells them something true about himself that he does not reveal to everyone else. I argue that this holds true for all friendships. We disclose biographical information to other people to become their friends. We stop playing characters while doing so. As robots cannot experience anything - let alone events that would shape their biographies – they cannot share such information with their users. Although they may convincingly simulate what it is like to interact with a friend, they cannot be one.

After I finish constructing the argument outlined above, I identify two privacy issues that anyone willing to defend the claim that we can enter friendships with robots must excuse. Firstly, robots almost always transmit information they receive from their users to their manufacturers. We cannot trust them to behave like our friends when we tell them sensitive facts about ourselves and claiming otherwise would legitimize surveillance mediated via these machines. Secondly, if a robot successfully convinces someone to interact with it, as friends do, it could manipulate them into divulging deeply personal information that only someone who genuinely cares about them should hear. I conclude by outlining how we could use the sociological insights I present in this contribution to accurately describe why someone may mistakenly believe a robot is their friend.

2 A FALSE BELIEF

Let me begin by stating some crucial facts concerning the state-of-the-art. Despite impressive advancements in AI and robotics over the past few decades, these fields are nowhere near developing technologies that we should consider conscious (Fodor, 2001; Dehaene et al., 2017; Larson, 2021; van Rooij et al. 2024). Any machine or program that seems to possess something akin to human-like cognition does so by mimicking behaviors that communicate this extraordinarily complex trait when performed by humans. For instance, some AI programs and robots can now “speak” or “write” in a manner that may convince some users that they have acquired a natural language (Turkle, 2017; Dillon, 2020; Stark, 2024). However, they rely on statistical inference to create this impression (Bender et al., 2021). When a human proficient in English says, “I enjoy watching movies”, they simultaneously express a subjective mental state (e.g., a preference) and understand the meaning of their words. However, a robot or AI program that conveys the same message does neither of these things. Instead, it simulates subjectivity and language comprehension by producing outputs that resemble utterances a human would plausibly make in a similar context (Searle, 1980; Bender et al., 2021; Hicks et al., 2024) - often while committing linguistic errors that betray their inability to understand fundamental aspects of language that enable meaningful communication between interlocutors (van de Braak et al., 2021; Adolfi et al., 2023; Hicks et al.,2024). They are mindless, unfeeling machines that (sometimes) appear otherwise by replicating what it is like to interact with another human.

People often respond positively to the simulation sketched above and react to human-like actions or utterances completed by a machine as though they were made by a human. For instance, they may maintain eye contact with a robot equipped with an anthropomorphic face (Breazeal, 2002; Licoppe & Rollet, 2020). Or say, “Thank you” and feel grateful when they receive a compliment from a chatbot (Turkle, 1995; Kudina, 2021). Many companies have developed robots for companionship that capitalize on this well-known phenomenon. Robots of this type operate in various contexts, such as people’s homes, care facilities, and schools (Sharkey, 2016; Guizzo, 2016; van Wynsberghe &Li, 2019). Examples here include Jibo, an embodied, household virtual assistant that appears to learn about its users’ personality over time (Guizzo, 2016); Pepper, a humanoid machine that responds to outward displays of

emotions (Carros et al., 2022); and Professor Einstein, an animatronic replica of its namesake which can chitchat with students while teaching them science (Kolodny, 2017). Robots of this kind simulate companionship by mimicking behaviors we associate with human who care about us. Their manufacturers design them to fulfil this role and use various technical means to achieve this goal. Now that I have detailed the technology I will discuss in this contribution, let us review how other philosophers have interpreted these machines and their ability to simulate friendships.

Since the mid-2000s, numerous robot ethicists have raised concerns that robots that seem friendly may encourage users to think that they have cognitive abilities they do not possess. Crucially for my argument, these scholars posit that some people may mistakenly believe they have entered a friendship with a robot that mimics actions humans typically perform to initiate and maintain such relationships. According to the scholar I will soon cite, this amounts to a false belief (e.g., a misconception based on faulty reasoning).

From my reading, Robert and Linda Sparrow were the first to forward argument in their seminal 2006 contribution, "In the hands of machines? The future of aged care" (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2006). They assert that we rob people of the truth when we let them believe a robot cares about them (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2006). As clarified earlier, robots do not have mental states. They cannot experience the complex interplay of emotions and intentions that humans experience when interacting with someone with whom they share an intimate relationship, for instance, a friend. Although they may complete actions that seem to signify that they wish to provide someone with "care, companionship, or affection" (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2006), they feel nothing towards this person. Sparrow and Sparrow warn that some users may not realize this (Sparrow & Sparrow, 2006). For instance, they may think a robot enjoys spending time with them because it mimics how someone who felt this way would behave. The machine's computerized reproduction of the practices humans use to convey fondness to one another prompted this user to develop a false belief. Sparrow and Sparrow (2006) claim that it is wrong to humour someone who holds such a false belief because we would have to withhold the truth from them and, therefore, take part in a lie.

Many other scholars have discussed and evaluated the false belief outlined earlier in their research. For instance, Sherry Turkle has spent a substantial part of her career investigating the effects robots that simulate the interactions we share with our friends and dependents have upon their users. She claims that users often mistakenly believe such machines need and respond to care (Turkle, 2017, p. 75, 103-127). Similarly, Noel and Amanda Sharkey have published numerous contributions (together and separately) detailing how overestimating a robot's capacity to understand norms that typically guide our behavior during interactions with people we care for can lead to harm (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2010; Sharkey, 2016; Sharkey & Sharkey, 2020). For instance, if someone thinks a robot can experience love or liking, they may assume that it will protect objects of its affection from emotional or physical injury and, therefore, let it handle care responsibilities that only humans should carry out (e.g., any sort of intimate care) (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2010). Other scholars, including Mathias Scheutz, Ryan Calo, Kate Darling, Clifford Nass, and Youngme Moon, have shown that even when people know that robots cannot understand the meaning of actions directed towards them, they regularly behave as though they can, possibly implying that humans generally have trouble seeing robots for what they are - i.e., ambulatory machines programmed to perform a set of tasks that sometimes resemble purposeful behaviour (Nass & Moon, 2000; Calo, 2010 Darling, 2012; Scheutz, 2014).

The literature I cited in the last two paragraphs supports one of the central theses of this contribution: we cannot be friends with robots, and anyone who thinks otherwise has developed a false belief. Robots do not have the cognitive abilities necessary to be our friends. Certainly, someone may think that a robot completes actions that imply it likes or even loves

them genuinely feels this way and, therefore, is their friend. Nonetheless, this is a false belief. I will not address the ethical significance of this false belief for most of this contribution. Instead, I chiefly aim to rebuke an argument that several of my peers working in robot ethics have forwarded that attempts to counter the thesis stated at the beginning of this paragraph. I will now recount this argument.

3 THE PERFORMANCE ACCOUNT

Some robot ethicists disagree with the well-established position I just described and contend that we can call a robot our friend without expressing a false belief. As stated in this contribution's introduction, they evidence this claim by categorizing friendships as character performances like those described by Erving Goffman. For this reason, I call this argument "the performance account". Before I begin detailing this account in earnest, I should state that I constructed it by synthesizing claims I found in various articles and book chapters published over the past decade that use similar strategies to defend the possibility of human-robot friendships. Thus, I cannot attribute it to a single author or text. Nonetheless, it follows a trend in robot ethics, chiefly associated with John Danaher, Mark Coeckelbergh, and David Gunkel, that attempts to prove that we should respect the relationships users (allegedly) form with robots as though they were comparable or equitable to the ones humans share with each other (Coeckelbergh, 2010; Coeckelbergh, 2013; Danaher, 2019b; Gunkel, 2022). I cite the first two authors quite frequently throughout the following section and I largely construct "the performance account" by interpreting contributions they published that appeal to sociological theory I will now outline.

As the performance account draws from Erving Goffman's sociological work on character performances, let us begin by unpacking what this means. In the mid-twentieth century, Goffman developed a novel way of describing human interactions that used the language of dramaturgy to label social phenomena. Most famously, he compared the communication strategies we use to convince others that we understand the largely unspoken, context-specific rules that govern everyday social engagements to stage actors' character performances (Goffman, 1959, p.13-28). From my reading of his work, he chose to use this analogy for following reasons.

First and foremost, we often embody something akin to a fictional persona while completing tasks that call for face-to-face communication. For instance, people working in the service industry usually appear friendly and eager to please (Dobrosovestnova et al., 2022). They seem to be such people but, truthfully, have fabricated a persona to ensure that their interactions with customers follow a relatively predictable rhythm. Secondly, different people playing the same character will behave comparably. Although every receptionist, server, and flight attendant has an individual style of customer service, they collectively behave like other people who also work in this capacity. We expect this from them. A server who politely takes our order at a restaurant will not surprise or disturb us, whereas one who snickers at our menu choices probably will. We experience something similar when we attend stage productions. Every one of the thousands of actors who have played Macbeth over the past four centuries has interpreted this character differently. However, they all gave comparable performances once on stage that someone familiar with this play would recognize as Macbeth-like. Finally, we do not play characters all the time (Goffman, 1959, p. 109-141). Many situations do not call for such performances. Service workers do not remain in character during breaks or after their shifts have ended, because they do not need to create the impression that they want to help customers when none are nearby (Goffman, 1959, p.166-203). Goffman compares such periods to the time actors spend off-stage (Goffman, 1959, p. 109-141). Someone who plays Macbeth does not do so indefinitely. Even during productions, they will drop character to complete tasks backstage. For instance, they may change their costumes, speak candidly with co-actors and

production staff, or simply eat a snack. If they did these things while their audience could see them, they would break the fourth wall and potentially ruin a performance.

Notice that my discussion of Goffman's work implies that people may communicate falsehoods concerning their perceptions during character performances. We often temper our emotions and keep tight-lipped to please an audience. A competent service worker will smile at a customer even if they dread talking to them, signalling geniality at moments when they do not feel this way at all (Goffman, 1959, p. 81-82; Hochschild, 1979; Hochschild, 2012, p. 3-24). We cannot tell whether someone who knows how to play a character well has honestly conveyed their perceptions or feigned a psychological state to make sure our interactions with them go smoothly (Goffman, 1959, p.28, p.203-231). Many service workers enjoy their jobs and sincerely express their emotions by cheerfully greeting customers. However, many others dislike what they do for a living and effectively lie when they create the impression that they want to help someone. We cannot see inside other people's minds; thus, we will treat a service worker who loves their profession and another who hates it similarly if they behave like one another. We encounter situations like this all the time (Goffman, 1959, p.28, p.203-231). During lectures, university students will react comparably to an instructor who genuinely feels confident and one who fakes this emotion to impress them (Coggins, 2023). Likewise, an office manager who praises a subordinate because they appreciate their hard work and another who does so because they know they should pretend to care about such things will generate the same response from said employee (Penz & Sauer, 2019).

Now that I have explained the basics of Goffman's and other scholars' understanding of character performances, I will spend the rest of this section detailing how the performance account uses this sociological theory to interpret friendships. According to the performance account, our friends draw from a repertoire of techniques to maintain the impression that they like us (Coeckelbergh, 2011; Coeckelbergh, 2017; Danaher, 2019a). They nod along attentively while we tell them about our day and laugh when we share humorous anecdotes with them. If we feel sad, they will comfort us and perhaps even offer us advice. They communicate that they care about us by performing actions that we collectively use to convey this message. They demonstrate that they understand what being a friend entails by behaving like other people we may call our friends (Coeckelbergh, 2011; Danaher, 2019a). According to the performance account, they play a character (Coeckelbergh, 2011; Coeckelbergh, 2017, Danaher, 2019a). As such, they sometimes mislead us to meet our expectations. Our friends often tell us white lies to spare our feelings or pretend to listen when we talk about something they find boring (de Graaf, 2016; Coeckelbergh, 2019a, p.126). We cannot know if our friends' words and actions genuinely reflect their intrapersonal experiences or amount to dishonest signals sent to preserve a performance (Danaher, 2019a). Demanding complete honesty from our friends would make it impossible for them to play this character well (Coeckelbergh, 2011). We probably would not call someone who tells us everything that goes through their mind our friend because they may say things that we would prefer they kept to themselves. If someone we considered our friend desperately wanted to announce they hated how we dressed, we would expect them to suppress this urge. We know that our friends regularly deceive us. We have all committed such deeds at some point in time. Doing so does not void a friendship. On the contrary, we usually act this way to ensure that whoever unknowingly witnesses our lies will continue to see us as their friend. The performance account contends that this observation proves we can call robots our friends without expressing a false belief. I will now reconstruct how the performance account arrives at this conclusion.

Suppose a robot consistently performs actions similar to those described above (Danaher, 2019a). Someone may understandably believe that this robot cares about them because it looks and sounds like a human who wishes to convey this message. We understand that such information does not always reflect our friends' perceptions. Nor can we ever know, for sure,

that it does or does not. We can only relate to the outward displays of friendliness that our friends impress upon us. We consider someone who competently cultivates this impression our friend regardless of their mental state (Coeckelbergh, 2011; Coeckelbergh, 2017, Danaher, 2019a). Therefore, we may treat a robot that does the same as our friend without expressing a false belief. Claiming otherwise would disqualify our human friends from being our friends. Prohibiting them from miscommunicating their thoughts would fundamentally change the relationship we share. We expect them to lie occasionally to stay in our good graces (de Graaf, 2016). If we accept that we remain friends with humans after they perpetrate such deceptions, we must concede that we can enter friendships with robots that convincingly communicate that they like us despite feeling nothing towards us. According to the performance account, we should consider anyone or anything our friend if they convincingly create such an impression via a competent character performance and not dwell on the fact that their mental states might not match their actions because we cannot expect our friends to be honest all the time. Hence, this concludes my reconstruction of the performance account. In the next two sections, I will demonstrate why this account does not hold water when we consult the literature it uses to evidence its claims.

4 WHAT IS PASSING?

I contend that Goffman's work and the sociology of everyday life, in general, does not support the performance account's conclusion. According to this body of literature, being someone's friend does not amount to playing a character. Goffman implies this himself (Goffman, 1959, p. 109-141, p. 166-203; Goffman, 1963, p. 31-45; Goffman, 1966, p. 39-42). However, his work does not directly discuss this subject. As such, I will interpret additional scholarship, most of which Goffman influenced, to evidence this hypothesis. I construct my argument by examining a specific type of character performance called "passing". People who practice passing miscommunicate their identities. They anticipate that being honest may produce negative, potentially dangerous responses from others because they belong to a marginalized group. They obscure their identity behind a performance. Furthermore, they tend to deliberately disclose sensitive, biographical information they conceal while passing to make friends. Doing so ends their performance. I will return to this crucial point in the next section of this contribution after I have explained what passing is.

Let me introduce some presuppositions before I begin my discussion on passing. Firstly, I do not want to imply that people should or should not practice it. I solely aim to describe it. I consider it something some marginalised people (including myself) do, usually because they understandably fear discrimination. I do not need or wish to examine the political or moral implications of passing to develop my argument. Nor will I. Secondly, I will frequently reference social categories that constitute people's identities in the following two sections. I will treat these things as social constructs. One becomes gay, straight, cisgender, transgender, disabled, or able-bodied by living within a society that differentiates people based on these historically and culturally relative distinctions (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 135-195; Stone, 1991; Oliver, 1990, p. 43-92; Butler, 2007, p. 107-175). If someone primarily expresses traits associated with being heterosexual, we will probably classify them as such. Likewise, if someone communicates that they only share romantic or sexual relationships with people of the same gender, we will likely conclude that they are gay. Such categories only make sense in societies that interpret sexuality this way (Ackroyd, 2017, p. 1-7). Europeans have not always treated same-gender attraction as signifying one's "homosexuality". Indeed, we began grouping people according to their orientation relatively recently (Thorp, 1992). Every category we use to denote social differences has a history. They do not represent eternal, essential qualities that some people have, and others do not. Instead, they reflect how our society currently orders us.

This final point helps us understand why people practice passing. Ordering often implies a hierarchy. Many individuals treat some groups worse than others (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 243-291; D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 24-49). Despite the substantial efforts to curb homophobia in Western Europe over the past fifty years, people still regularly experience bigotry during day-to-day interactions when they communicate that they are gay. Simply holding one's partners' hand on the street can be dangerous for gay people. Likewise, talking openly about one's orientation in public may anger homophobes within earshot. Other marginalized groups experience similar forms of oppression. Transgender people, as a demographic, suffer harassment and assault at an alarmingly high rate (Namaste, 2000; Stryker, 2017, p.203, p.221-224; Faye, 2021, p.1-17) While disabled people often endure patronization, unwanted attention, and ridicule while going about their day (Siebers, 2004; Cox, 2013). Living under the threat of the types of interpersonal oppression outlined above is exhausting. Hence, marginalized people have developed many strategies to avoid entering hostile social situations. These strategies include passing.

Goffman discusses passing in his 1963 book "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" (Goffman, 1963, p. 85-92). He explains that we infer people's group affiliations by interpreting verbal and non-verbal symbolic representations of their biographies (e.g., the events they lived through that shaped how people, including themselves, perceive them (Goffman, 1963, p.68-80). A man who speaks about his ex-boyfriend signals that he has had a romantic relationship with another man. Likewise, someone who has a visible prosthetic limb shows that they have acquired or were born with a disability (Goffman, 1963, p. 57-64). In both cases, these people reveal biographical facts about themselves that disqualify them from being considered heterosexual or able-bodied, respectively. We cannot rewrite our life histories. If we have done or experienced something that affiliates or disaffiliates us with a group, others will classify us accordingly once they learn about these events (Goffman, 1963, p.129-151). People often do not rank others based on such things. I hope my readers agree that queer, straight, able-bodied, and disabled people all deserve respect and fair treatment. Nonetheless, prejudices still run rampant in the modern world. A homophobic individual will react antagonistically upon discovering that a male interlocutor has an ex-boyfriend. Just as a person who thinks disabled people are weak or defective will assume that someone who uses a prosthesis has these character flaws. Prejudiced people make these judgements after they realize someone's biography proves they belong to a group they consider deviant, dangerous, or incapable (Goffman, 1963, p. 57-64). They cannot reach this conclusion without sufficient evidence.

Some marginalized people conceal such evidence to convince others they have biographies they do not have. They effectively create disguises by manipulating symbols associated with groups that do not face discrimination (Granfield, 1991; Kanuha, 1999). Goffman and other sociologists call this practice passing. Sometimes passing requires people to communicate falsehoods through spoken language. For instance, a gay man may pass as straight by fabricating stories about female love interests when someone asks him about his dating history (Brown, 1991; Renfrow, 2004). However, at other times, it demands physical effort from them. For instance, someone who uses a prosthesis may obscure it underneath their clothing to pass as able-bodied (Goffman, 1963, p. 92-125). Some things are easier to hide than others. We usually assume that people who communicate that they exclusively find members of the opposite gender attractive are straight. Thus, we probably will not doubt a gay person who makes such claims. In contrast, we cannot always control how others interpret our outward appearances without refraining from entering some social situations altogether (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 116-186). A person who uses an artificial limb cannot disguise this fact during activities where they need to disrobe or wear clothing that does not cover their entire body (e.g., sexual intercourse, medical examinations, or sporting events). There are countless ways people may accomplish passing. However, practising it always requires them to suppress or downplay traits that announce their

marginalised status by looking and sounding like someone who does not have these traits (Allport, 1954, p. 145-146, p. 150-152; Goffman, 1963, p.85-92; Kanuha, 1999; Renfrow, 2004).

Regardless of how or why someone passes, they must vigilantly manage the information they impress upon others. One slip of the tongue or misstep may ruin an otherwise convincing attempt to pass. A seemingly heterosexual person who mentions they frequent a gay bar may raise eyebrows while speaking with people familiar with this establishment. Similarly, we will realize someone we assumed was able-bodied has a physiological disability if they neglect to hide their medical aids during an interaction. Indeed, people cannot pass all the time. They cannot persuade someone who knows about the facts they obscure while passing to interpret their assumed identity as credible. Once they disclose information of this kind to someone, they stop passing (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 116-186; Stone, 1991; Rogers, 1992). This sometimes happens at inopportune moments. Being outed as gay during interactions with evidently homophobic people would endanger someone. At other times, though, passing would complicate or disrupt an interaction that does not call for it. A disabled person probably will not present themselves as able-bodied during appointments with medical professionals who help them manage their condition as doing so would prevent them from talking openly about their health and medical history with a person who already knows that they are disabled (Siebers, 2004). There are many other situations that motivate people who practice passing to communicate honestly about their experiences, including the interactions they share with people they trust will respect their identities. I will return to this point in the next section of this contribution.

Although Goffman does not state it outright, his description of passing resembles his account of character performances. Considering that he more-or-less stopped using the language of dramaturgy to describe social interactions by the time he published “Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity”, this is somewhat unsurprising. Nonetheless, if we use this framework to discuss passing, we could say that someone who practices it plays a character. I am not the first scholar to suggest this interpretation. Indeed, numerous sociologists have appealed to Goffman's work to make similar claims (Kanuha, 1999; Renfrow, 2004). Passing requires people to communicate information via their words, appearances, and behavior to conform to others' expectations. When performed well, it enables practitioners to enter and complete interactions without encountering unwelcome disruptions. Additionally, people who pass often miscommunicate their perceptions. They behave like unhappy servers, who begrudgingly smile at guests while taking their orders. Or our friends, when they pretend to care about our troubles despite having something else on their minds, according to the performance account. They express falsehoods about their experiences because they know that honesty would ruin their performance and potentially expose them to discrimination.

5 FRIENDS ARE NOT “ELECTRIC” CHARACTERS

In the previous two sections of this contribution, I briefly discussed something that the performance account overlooks. According to Goffman and other sociologists who draw from his work, we do not play characters during every interaction. Using this framework to interpret all the social situations that we encounter throughout our day-to-day lives would misrepresent what it is like to be among other people. Goffman mentions many interactions of this kind in his dramaturgically focused work but does not spend much time examining them (Goffman, 1959, p. 231-249). Nonetheless, he heavily implies that the moments we share with our loved ones, including our friends, do not center around character performances (Goffman, 1959, p. 84; Goffman, 1963, p. 155-164; Goffman, 1966, p.3-13). I do not expect my readers to treat my interpretation of Goffman’s work as gospel truth. As such, I will use the sociological insights I introduced earlier to prove my point.

I build my case by presenting a thought experiment involving passing. I decided to develop this thought experiment because it emphasizes, via a high-stakes example, the risk we always take when we initiate a friendship. Additionally, it uses the literature the performance account draws from to demonstrate that robots categorically cannot complete an action that enables the creation of a friendship. Indeed, the narrative I construct below illustrates that, contrary to the performance account's claims otherwise, we must stop attempting to manage another person's perceptions of us through a character performance, at least momentarily, to become their friend. I explain this process through a discussion on passing because people who practice it indisputably drop character when they deliberately disclose biographical information concerning their marginalized identities to bond with someone they trust. They cannot play the character they were playing once they have communicated such information. I argue that we always behave this way to initiate friendships. We must tell someone something true about our experiences to let them know us as friends know each other. We do not play characters while doing so. Although I describe the experience of making friends, I will not offer a comprehensive definition of being one. Instead, I aim to identify a necessary condition of friendship that robots cannot satisfy, namely, the truthful communication of biographical information.

Suppose a gay man chooses to pass as straight at his office job. He has come out to his friends and family. However, he does not want his colleagues, managers, or clients to learn anything about his private life that could out him. For the sake of argument, let us say he experienced discrimination at a previous workplace. He conceals his orientation because he does not trust the people he encounters during work hours to respect his identity. He refrains from discussing life experiences at work that someone could interpret as symbolizing his attraction to men and changes the subject whenever someone asks him about his love life. He has one colleague, though, he likes more than others. He enjoys working with this person and often spends his lunch break chatting with them. Additionally, this colleague has consistently shown that they respect gay people and suggested that they understand the risks of being out at work. One day he decides to tell this colleague that he is gay.

Why would someone share such deeply private information with someone else? As the saying goes, one cannot unring a bell. This action will forever change how these two people relate to each other. We can safely assume that the protagonist of this thought experiment believes he can trust his colleague. He senses that telling them about his identity will not upset, enrage, or alarm them. Instead, he anticipates they will appreciate this gesture and understand they should not disseminate the information they learned. Let us say they do. They pretend they never heard this secret and behave as though they believe their colleague is straight to ensure he can continue passing. They know something that other people at their workplace do not. If they revealed this information at work, they would simultaneously out their colleague and massively damage - or utterly ruin – their relationship. I think my readers will agree that these two characters have become friends or, at the very least, gone through an event together that may produce this outcome. Indeed, I contend that I just described a necessary condition of friendship.

Something important happens when we willingly disclose biographical information in the manner sketched above (Rössler, 2004/2005, p.129-141). We invite someone to become our friend. We let them know us differently than they did before by telling them truths about ourselves that we do not disclose during many other day-to-day interactions (Inness, 1992, p.95-116; Rössler, 2004/2005, p.131). If they recognize and welcome this invitation, we may earn a friend. This does not always happen. Sometimes we tell people things they do not want to hear which make them think worse of us. For instance, the fictional gay man introduced in this section could have mistakenly believed his colleague did not harbor homophobic views. If this were the case, he would have received a markedly unfriendly response to his invitation. Thankfully, his colleague's perception of him did not deteriorate after he came out. If anything,

it improved. They recognized that he had entrusted them with information they must keep to themselves and supported his decision to pass. This does not automatically mean they will become friends though. Once they have spent more time together, these two characters may discover that they do not have much in common or disagree upon matters they both find important. Afterwards, they may decide to part ways and end their budding friendship. Nonetheless, they laid the grounds necessary to become friends. One of them shared biographical information, while the other respected what it meant and retained it. We cannot make friends without completing the first action in this sequence.

Let me reiterate that I chose this high-stakes example for illustrative purposes. We can substitute the information revealed in this thought experiment - I would argue – with any biographical fact that someone does not disclose indiscriminately. For instance, one person may fear that others will judge them if they learn about their struggles with addiction, whereas another may worry that their peers will find them crass once they discover they enjoy an unpopular hobby. The content of this information matters less than people's expectations of its owner. We know that we cannot tell every person we meet everything about us without turning otherwise unremarkable interactions into fiascoes or, quite possibly, disasters. A server who recounts traumatic childhood memories while taking orders will probably annoy their guests and may even face the sack if they turn this indiscretion into a habit. Likewise, a gay man who passes as straight at work to avoid discrimination may incense or infuriate his bigoted colleagues if he discusses his dating history. We strategically choose with whom we share such information. Under the right conditions, this action will lead to the formation of a friendship (Inness, 1992, p. 95-116).

I will now interpret the thought experiment sketched above via social theory, which portrays interactions as character performances. Let me begin with a question. When the gay man who practices passing at work came out to his colleague, was he playing a character? I would answer, no. He was playing a character beforehand. He managed his colleagues' perception of him to ensure their interactions remained agreeable. Maintaining this performance while coming out would be impossible. He cannot appear straight to his colleague after he says he is gay. He did something utterly out of character. He may soon recommence his efforts to present himself as straight during interactions with his colleague, especially when someone from their office is nearby. Nonetheless, he had to stop doing so to communicate true biographical information. At least for a moment, he let his colleague see behind the performance he uses to protect himself. He dropped character to attempt to bond with them. I contend that we must always do this to enter friendships. We do not play characters when we tell someone something true about ourselves to invite them into a friendship. We reveal an aspect of our biography to them that they may like or dislike. Either way, this action signifies the absence of a character performance.

Please allow me to speak directly to my readers for a moment to communicate, in plain language, the pivotal claim I just made which, I contend, shows that the sociological theory the performance account relies on does not support its conclusion that we can enter friendships with robots. I assume you have made a new friend in the past, perhaps quite recently. You may have met this person at work, at a party, or online. During your immediate interactions with them, you may have "played a character" as described throughout this contribution. Spending time with new people, especially ones who we want to like us, can be daunting. Hence, we often rely on character performances to influence others' perceptions of us. You may have tried to convince this potential friend that you are the kind of person with whom they would enjoy being friends by exaggerating or concealing traits you have. You may have appeared more fun, sensitive, energetic, or sociable than you are. Perhaps you laughed at a joke they that told that you did not find particularly funny or expressed gratitude when they gave you a gift you did not want at all. At some point, though, I am sure you behaved like the protagonist of the thought experiment I introduced in this section. You communicated something to this person that

accurately reflected what it is like to be you. Maybe you told them about your strained relationship with your parents. Or mentioned that you wish you could quit your job to pursue your real passion. You stopped trying to impress this person, as one does during a character performance, to let them know you as friends know one another. This is how we initiate friendships. Robots cannot do this because they lack experiences altogether.

Certainly, they could convince someone otherwise by saying or doing things that suggest they have lived through events that shaped who they are. For instance, they could produce utterances that seemingly express biographical information that a human interlocutor would plausibly feel unsafe or insecure discussing candidly. This, nonetheless, will always amount to fiction because robots cannot experience anything nor, consequentially, develop biographies. They cannot invite someone into a friendship because they do not have any biographical information to share. Therefore, they cannot be our friends. At best, we could say that they can play the character of a friend - as "the performance account" claims. Doing so, however, does not equate to being a friend as remaining in character indefinitely means robots cannot satisfy the necessary condition of friendship I identified earlier.

6 PRIVACY ISSUES

I developed this argument against the possibility of human-robot friendships because some philosophers have drawn an antithetical conclusion by appealing to the same body of literature I referenced throughout this contribution. I labelled such attempts to prove that we can call robots our friends, without expressing a false belief, "the performance account". The performance account claims that being a friend amounts to playing a character, thus we can become friends with robots that behave this way. In contrast, I have shown that we cannot enter friendships with someone (or something) that creates the impression that they are our friends until they stop playing a character to share biographical information with us. Even the most convincingly friend-like robot (e.g., one that behaves precisely as we expect friends to behave) cannot fulfil this condition. As friendly as it might seem, such a machine cannot disclose information that accurately reflects its biography – because it has none.

Although I chiefly aimed to critique the performance account via a close reading of the sociology of everyday life, I have frequently alluded to something that ethicists would call a moral value. Namely: privacy. I implied that friendships require privacy. We tell our friends facts about ourselves that we do not tell everyone. We let them know us as the people we are rather than the characters we play (Rössler, 2004/2005, p.129-141). It would be well beyond the scope of this contribution to explain exactly why we value the privacy we share with our friends. Nonetheless, I will conclude my critique of the performance account by identifying two privacy issues it excuses by claiming that we can relate to robots as though they were human friends. Readers should treat the following argument as a supplement to the critique I presented earlier. Indeed, in this section, I will not say anything more about how the sociological theory the performance account draws from does not support the idea that we can become friends with robots. Instead, I will appeal to the claims I made in previous sections of this contribution to demonstrate that the performance account overlooks two privacy issues I will now detail.

Firstly, if someone genuinely believed that a robot was their friend, they would almost certainly share biographical information with this machine to try to bond with it. This is how we build friendships with humans after all. Thus, we can assume that people who want to become or remain friends with a robot will behave comparably. Although I have almost exclusively focused on the first time this happens in this contribution (i.e., the moment someone initiates a friendship via information disclosure), we continuously tell our friends things about ourselves that we do not disclose to everyone (Inness, 1992, p. 74-116; Rössler, 2004/2005, p.129-141). The content of such information ranges widely. As suggested throughout the previous section,

however, we tend to share biographical facts with our friends we suspect many other people would find displeasing. Obvious examples here include: our sexual orientation, mental health histories, or dislike of our jobs. Whereas we expect people we already or wish to consider our friends to understand they should not disseminate such information, we cannot trust robots to do this.

Many, if not most robots, continuously transmit information to their manufacturers. For instance, robots that mimic human speech constantly upload audial recordings to their manufacturer's servers for processing (Sharkey & Sharkey, 2010; Kudina, 2021). Therefore, someone who shares biographical information with a robot may unknowingly share this information with a company too. Many end-user agreements stipulate that companies can use data of this kind as they wish (Terpstra et al., 2019) and research shows that people usually do not read these contracts before they begin using technologies that gather data from them (Solove, 2013). Hence, someone who believes they have a robot friend may inadvertently disclose deeply personal information to said robot's manufacturer that they only want their friends to know. Furthermore, technology companies regularly sell datasets concerning their user bases' preferences, identities, and habits to other businesses and, sometimes, governmental agencies (O'Neil, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Supposed robot friends, it follows, almost certainly will mediate surveillance in some capacity. The performance account overlooks this privacy issue. Claiming that robots that outwardly appear friendly are friends, even though they cannot stop sharing the information they receive, would simultaneously gloss over these machines' surveillance capabilities; and suggest that our human friends may share the often highly sensitive information we tell them without jeopardizing our relationship.

A proponent of the performance account could counter this argument by claiming that we should only relate to robots as friends when they do not transmit such information through the internet. For instance, a well-meaning company could create a robot friend that preserves its users' privacy by ensuring it does not send them any information deemed private. Its users may interact with this robot without worrying that unseen parties will learn anything revealing about them. I posit that this would still create a privacy issue – albeit one that requires several argumentative steps to identify.

Many people would react negatively to the facts we disclose to our friends. For instance, our bosses do not want to hear about how boring we find our jobs, and we may upset a stranger if we speak candidly about our mental health while waiting with them at a train station. Sharing information of this kind is risky and we can create unpleasant or hostile situations when we mistakenly relate to someone as a friend. We become vulnerable when we tell someone our true thoughts, feelings, and experiences because they may learn things about us that they do not like. If someone were to behave like a friend and successfully encouraged us to tell them such sensitive information, even though they did not care about us, we would probably feel like they wronged us somehow. Suppose they create the impression that they want to hear about our experiences dealing with an aspect of our lives that causes us stress so they can help and support us as a friend would. If they told us after this exchange that they do not like us nor care about our struggles, we could claim that they manipulated us into divulging information that we only want our genuine friends to hear. Furthermore, they convinced us to let our guard down and take a risk that we would not have taken if we knew their true nature. Even if this pretend friend did not disclose what they heard to anyone else, they nonetheless deceived us to gain access to information only someone who legitimately cares about us should know.

I contend that the hypothetical, privacy-preserving robot I outlined earlier would produce a harm comparable to that created by this pretend friend. A robot that encourages its user, via its friendly demeanor, to share information in the manner sketched above prompts this person to take the leap of faith required to initiate a friendship. A robot cannot understand the significance of this action. Indeed, only other humans can. Thus, this person acts courageously

for a machine that does not care about them or recognize the vulnerable state they have placed themselves in. A human friend would (ideally) treat this action with the respect it deserves and likely feel closer to this person afterwards. In contrast, a robot "friend" would make this person feel like they have bonded with someone when they have not, thus depriving them of the care, compassion, and affection they deserve when they expose themselves to potential social backlash for the sake of a friendship.

Although this may not sound like a privacy issue, largely because it does not involve the wrongful transmission of information, I contend that it is. The process described above conflicts with a principle derived from the legal and ethical literature on privacy, namely: we deserve to share our private lives exclusively with people of our choosing who love or like us (Warren & Brandies, 1890; Inness, 1992, p.106; Solove, 2008, p.34-35; European Convention of Human Rights, 2022). Such people include our friends. The performance account fails to recognize this. It suggests that robots or people who appear friendly are our friends, thus, do nothing wrong when they encourage us to disclose our vulnerabilities to them under false pretenses. When we tell someone (or something) information that we do not typically disclose to other people, we communicate that we have chosen to form a private relationship with them. If they create the false impression that they want the same thing, they disrespect us as individuals who deserve to enjoy our private lives with people who care about us.

7 CONCLUSION

I began this contribution with two objectives in mind. Firstly, I aimed to demonstrate that the sociology of everyday life does not support the idea that we can become friends with robots - despite what some robot ethics have claimed. And secondly, I wished to identify two privacy issues that robots which convince people to treat them like their friends would produce. Furthermore, I believe that I have introduced sociological insights that lay the grounds for new avenues of research while working towards these goals. Indeed, I think I can provide a preliminary answer to an important question I have yet to address based on the content of this contribution. Specifically: why might someone believe they have a robot friend according to the sociology of everyday life? Let us return to the discussion of service work I used to introduce Goffman's social theory in section 2 to think this through.

As I stated, service workers often create the impression that they like or care about their customers. This is a crucial aspect of their profession (Hochschild, 1979; Penz & Sauer, 2019). Many of them take vocational courses to learn how to maintain an air of friendliness even during highly stressful situations at their workplace. An expert service worker will manipulate symbols (e.g., their tone of voice, facial expressions, and choice of words) to convince people that they enjoy interacting with them regardless of their actual mood. I assume that my readers know this. We generally understand that service workers who appear friendly are just doing their jobs. Sometimes, though, people do not recognize this fact. They become convinced that a server, receptionist, or flight attendant wants to share a private rather than professional relationship with them (Urry, 2005, p. 59-74). They mistake an impression of friendliness for the real deal.

We could say that something similar happens when someone develops the false belief that they have a robot friend. In both cases, a person erroneously thinks that someone or something wishes to bond with them because they have misread symbols that would communicate this message in other settings. They failed to notice context cues that would have prevented them from making this mistake (e.g., the fact they are interacting with someone who is paid to help them or talking to a machine). I believe this comparison accurately captures how a sociologist of everyday life would interpret this phenomenon. Nonetheless, developing the conceptual and theoretical means to adequately use this observation to describe why someone could confuse a

lifeless, uncaring robot for a friend would merit another contribution (at least). I hope to return to this topic soon. Until then, I would like to invite other researchers from robot ethics to develop the ideas presented above themselves because I believe that sociological research of this kind would enrich philosophical discussions on human-robot interactions that involve the simulation of friendliness.

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