

# WHAT HAVE YOU CHANGED YOUR MIND ABOUT?

TODAY'S LEADING MINDS  
RETHINK EVERYTHING



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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BRIAN ENO

HARPER PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

2009

HARPER PERENNIAL

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FIRST EDITION

*Designed by Aline C. Pace*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-06-168654-2

09 10 11 12 13 OV/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

565502

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*I used to believe that we could understand psychology at different levels of analysis, and events at any one of the levels could be studied independently of events at the other levels.*

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*A sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein's from his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (5.6) was like a dogma for me: "Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt." ("The limits of my language signify the limits of my world"—my translation.) Now I react to this sentence with an emphatic "No!"*

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*I'd have gladly voted to ban fraternities, ROTC, and most sports teams from my university. But not anymore.*

the tone of the whole. It is possible to maintain big healthy gardens online. The solution isn't cheap, or easy, or hands-free. Few things of value are.

## SHERRY TURKLE

*Psychologist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; author of Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*

### The Robot in the Wings

Throughout my academic career—when I was studying the relationship between psychoanalysis and society and when I moved to the social and psychological studies of technology—I've seen myself as a cultural critic. I don't mention this to stress how lofty a job I put myself in but rather to emphasize that I saw the job as theoretical in its essence. Technologists design things; I was able to offer insights about the nature of people's connections to them, the mix of feelings in the thoughts, how passions mixed with cognition. Trained in psychoanalysis, I didn't see my stance as therapeutic, but it did borrow from the reticence of that discipline. I was not there to meddle, I was there to listen and interpret. Over the past year, I've changed my mind: Our current relationship with technology calls forth a more meddlesome me.

In the past, because I didn't criticize but tried to analyze, some of my colleagues found me complicit with the agenda of technology builders. I didn't like that much, but I understood that this was perhaps the price to pay for maintaining my distance, as Little Red Riding Hood's wolf would say, "the better to

hear them with." This year I realized I had changed my stance. In studying reactions to advanced robots—robots that look you in the eye, remember your name, and track your motions—I found more and more people who were considering such robots as friends, confidants, and (as they imagined technical improvements) even as lovers. I became less distanced. I began to think about technological promiscuity. Are we so lonely that we love whatever is put in front of us?

I kept listening for what stood behind the new promiscuity (my habit of listening didn't change), and I began to get evidence of a certain fatigue with the difficulties of dealing with people. A female graduate student came up to me after a lecture and told me she would gladly trade in her boyfriend for a sophisticated humanoid robot as long as the robot could produce what she called "caring behavior." She told me that she needed "the feeling of civility in the house and I don't want to be alone." She said, "If the robot could provide a civil environment, I would be happy to help produce the illusion that there is somebody really with me." What she was looking for, she told me, was a "no-risk relationship" that would stave off loneliness; a responsive robot, even if it was just exhibiting scripted behavior, seemed better to her than a demanding boyfriend. I thought she was joking. She was not.

In a way, I should not have been surprised. For a decade, I had studied the appeal of sociable robots. They push our Darwinian buttons. They are programmed to exhibit the kind of behavior we have come to associate with sentience and empathy, which leads us to think of them as autonomous creatures with intentions and emotions. Once people see robots as creatures, they feel a desire to nurture them. With this feeling comes the fantasy of reciprocation. As you begin to care for these creatures, you want them to care about you.

And yet, in the past, I had found that people approached computational intelligence with a certain "romantic reaction."

Their basic position was that simulated thinking might be thinking but simulated feeling was never feeling and simulated love was never love. Now I was hearing something new. People were more likely to tell me that human beings might be "simulating" their feelings; as one woman put it, "How do I know that my lover is not just simulating everything he says he feels?" Everyone I spoke with was busier than ever with their e-mail and their virtual friendships. Everyone was busier than ever with their social networking and always-on/always-on-you PDAs. Someone once said that loneliness is failed solitude. Could no one stand to be alone anymore, before they turned to a device? Were cyberconnections paving the way to thinking that a robot might be sufficient unto the day? I was left contemplating not the cleverness of engineering but the vulnerabilities of people.

Last spring, I had a public exchange in which a colleague wrote about the "I-Thou" dyad of people and robots, and I could sense Martin Buber spinning in his grave. The "I" was the person in the relationship, but how could the robot be the "Thou"? I once would have approached such an interchange with discipline, interested only in the projection of feeling onto the robot. But I had taken that position when robots seemed only an evocative object for better understanding people's hopes and frustrations. Now people were doing more than fantasizing. There was a new earnestness. They saw the robot in the wings and were excited to welcome it onstage.

In no time at all, it seemed, a book came out called *Love and Sex with Robots* and a reporter from *Scientific American* was interviewing me about the psychology of robot marriage. The conversation was memorable, and I warned my interviewer that I would use it as data. He asked me if my opposition to people marrying robots put me in the same camp as those who oppose gay marriage. I tried to explain that just because I didn't think people could marry machines didn't mean I didn't think mixes

of people with people was fair play. He accused me of species chauvinism. Wasn't this the kind of talk that homophobes once used—not considering gays as “real people”? Right there, I changed my mind about my vocation. I changed my mind about where my energies were most needed. I was turning in my card as a cultural critic the way I had always envisaged that identity. Now I was a cultural *critic*. I wasn't neutral, I was very sad.