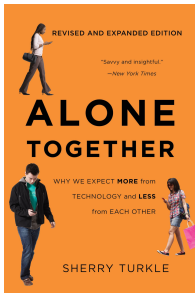


Alone Together:

Why we expect more from technology and less from each other



“Alone Together:

Why we expect more from technology and less from each other”

by Sherry Turkle, 2017

ISBN: 978 0 465093656

Sherry Turkle has an important and influential voice in current debates about interactions between humans and machines. She trained as a psychoanalyst and joined the MIT computer science department in the 1970's, working with the celebrated computer pioneer Joseph Weizenbaum. Her first book *The Second Self* published in 1984, celebrated the positive potential of interactions with computers for reflecting on the self. But over the succeeding years Turkle's optimism waned and her concerns about the negative psychological and social consequences of growing relationships with machines increased. *“These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time.... We fear the risks and disappointments of relationships with our fellow humans. We expect more from technology and less from each other.”*

Her 2011 book *Alone Together* is based on hundreds of interviews and observations of children and young adults as they interacted with a variety of robots constructed at MIT and elsewhere, as well as other forms of digital interaction. A recurring theme throughout the book is the apparent humanising of machines and the de-humanisation of humans. *“.....we seem determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as things.”*

Turkle identifies a particular 'relational vulnerability' of human beings in the early 21st century. *“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And it turns out we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and sociable robots may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other...we'd rather text than talk.”*

From the perspective of a psychoanalytically trained psychologist Turkle bemoans the loss of authenticity in simulated relationships. *“I am troubled by the idea of seeking intimacy with a machine that has no feelings, can have no feelings, and is really just a clever collection of 'as if' performances, behaving as if it cared, as if it understood us.”*

She describes a particular interaction between Miriam, an elderly woman living alone in a care facility and Paro, a sophisticated AI-powered robot designed to mimic the behaviour of a baby seal. On this occasion Miriam is particularly depressed because of a difficult interaction with her son, and she believes that the robot is depressed as well. She turns to Paro, strokes him again, and says, *“Yes, you're sad, aren't you? It's tough out there. Yes, it's hard.”* In response Paro turns its head toward her and purrs approvingly.

Turkle writes *“...in the moment of apparent connection between Miriam and her Paro, a moment that comforted her, the robot understood nothing. Miriam experienced an intimacy with another, but she was in fact alone..... We don't seem to care what these artificial intelligences “know” or “understand” of the human moments we might “share” with them. We are poised to attach to the inanimate without prejudice.”*

Alone Together:

Why we expect more from technology and less from each other

Her particular concern is about the impact of the sophisticated technology she describes as 'relational artefacts' on young people. *"Teenagers are drawn to the idea of technological communion. They talk easily of robots that would be safe and predictable companions. These young people have grown up with sociable robot pets which portrayed emotion, said they cared and asked to be cared for. We are psychologically programmed not only to nurture what we love but to love what we nurture."*

Elsewhere Turkle has written *"the question is not whether children will love their robotic pets more than their real life pets or even their parents, but what will loving come to mean?"*

The book circles repetitively around these concerns, asking the question of how the new technologies are shaping us, and whether this is serving our human purposes. *"What are we thinking about when we are thinking about robots? We are thinking about the meaning of being alive, about the nature of attachment, about what makes a person. And then more generally we are rethinking, What is a relationship?... What are we willing to give up when we turn to robots rather than humans?"*

Although somewhat repetitive and overly discursive, Sherry Turkle's book is insightful and perceptive in analysing the psychological roots of contemporary desires for intimacy with machines. But those looking for detailed and practical suggestions for a way forward will probably be disappointed. She argues that we should be sceptical about the idea of the linear progress of technology. As in the psychoanalytic interaction we should *"...encourage humility and a state of mind in which we are most open to facing problems and reconsidering decisions. We should acknowledge costs and recognise the things we hold inviolate...No matter how difficult, it is time to look again to the virtues of solitude, deliberateness and living fully in the moment....."*

Yet the book closes with a rare note of optimism *"We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology busy, we shall have better."*

John Wyatt