Outsourcing Empathy? Why Alexa Is Not Up To the Task

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Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011. With new preface, 2017.).

In her preface to the 2017 edition of *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle identifies the exact moment she felt misgivings about the many promises of technology. It was two decades earlier, during an encounter with "Cog," a humanoid robot consisting of an adult-sized torso, complete with moving head, neck, and arms. Mechanically, the robot's main action tracked movement; however, when this function was housed in a human-like body, Cog took on (as intended) human-seeming characteristics. As a psychologist and anthropologist who had spent years observing the effects of robotic technology on people young and old, Turkle was mentally prepared and even enthusiastic about this new and promising creation. When she entered the room with Cog, the robot "noticed" her—that is, moved its head and followed her movements—and Turkle was astonished to find herself "unreasonably happy" that she had been recognized and acknowledged by the robot. She realized she was experiencing the "robotic moment"; in an instant her mental identification of the robot changed from a tool for her use to an "other"—a possibly equal entity with which she could enter into relationship. As an anthropologist, she had watched children and the elderly emotionally attach to machines and had identified such behavior as a problem. But with Cog, Turkle was surprised by her own visceral desire to spend time with the robot—to be in its company—and to have a human-like relationship with a non-living thing.

Why do we want machines to care? This is the overarching question of Turkle's decades of research, study, observation, writing, and personal reflection. These technological objects are only that—objects, machines—and yet we expect them to do something for which they are not built. Intuitive programming housed in an approximation of a body doesn't really fool us into thinking that machines are real like us, or even the "real" imagined in childhood stories (*The Velveteen Rabbit, Pinocchio*)—but our desire to treat them as more than machines denotes a change in how we understand life and relationship.

Turkle describes this phenomenon as being "alive enough." She began studying children's interactive toys in the late 1970's and was there when the manufacturers of these toys realized that if a child cares *for* the object, it becomes a creature, and the child cannot bring himself to turn away, cannot make himself not care. "We love what we nurture," Turkle points out, and if a cute, talking creature toy "makes you love it, and you feel it loves you in return, it is alive enough to be a creature." Further, and perhaps more disturbing, is that in her innumerable studies of children interacting with technological

care-objects, she found that the children asked of the robots what they needed the most—substitutes for the attention of adults and a sense of their own importance.

Cog, the humanoid robot of Turkle's awakening moment, takes this a step further by seeming to offer to care in return. Elder care comes to mind almost immediately in this line of thinking, and in 2009 MIT's AgeLab presented the robot Paro with the aging parent in mind. But Paro is a "sociable robot" and is not a physical aide, meant as a companion to help isolated nursing home patients stave off loneliness. The robot mimics caring behavior by "listening" and "responding"; but of course a machine, by definition, cannot care and cannot hold a conversation. Performance (here, the performance of caring) has been deemed sufficient. New relationships are being developed and lived because we are settling for "alive enough," "caring enough," "human enough."

Turkle refers to theologian Martin Buber's "I-Thou" understanding of relationship in describing the interactions she observed between people and Cog. Since the robot has a face, makes eye contact, and follows movement, there is physical similarity to the human—but not, she insists, a symmetry. Instead of the person giving commands and the robot executing them, we enter into a type of half-way conversation with our devices. Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa are examples of this hybrid back-and-forth that is not merely mechanical, but also not human. We have started to mistake interaction with kinship, letting ourselves believe that "people are not so different from robots [and] robots are not so different from people." Once this idea is accepted (usually unconsciously), human beings will go to great lengths to keep this belief intact. When the inventor of Cog wanted to show a group of children that the robot is only a machine, he switched it off, effectively turning the animated humanoid into a limp puppet. The children were dismayed and solicitous, speaking of Cog as being wounded. (Turkle likens this to turning the boy Pinocchio back into a wooden doll.) Lifelike behavior is no longer seen as a deception, as something a machine acts out or has as a program; life-*like* behavior in robots is now preferred to *actual* mechanical behavior in robots or the real-life behavior of human beings.

When she wrote *Alone Together* in 2011, Turkle divided the book into two sections: the hardware of robots and the software of networking. But in the 2017 preface, she realized that making distinctions between them is a moot point: whether hardware or software, in both cases human beings are interacting with *machinery*. Whether it's due to the speed of advancing technology or 21st century man's wholehearted embrace of digital culture, the distinction between hardware and software has really become superfluous. We carry our robots in our back pockets. In social computing, "conversations turn into mere connections," and the hardware has "exploded far beyond the robotic into the world of apps." Our smartphones allow us to be physically present, but we are constantly absent mentally and emotionally. We sit with our families at our dining room tables, each immersed in a separate world, living "alone together."

Without being shrill, Turkle urges the reader to consider the implications of accepting mere information in place of real knowledge, of trading in human empathy for mechanical distraction. She is concerned that we believe the lie that we need technology to free us from a situation technology itself has created. But "we," she insists, "are the empathy app." *Alone Together* is an essential read, not only because it is thoughtful, articulate, and thoroughly researched, but because the author insists on thinking through a new understanding of what it means to be human in a new world together.

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