Alone Together – Sherry Turkle

“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robots may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.” (Turkle, 2011)

This is an interesting quote, But I think it may also engender another one: does technology allows us to wear a ‘mask’ and hide those parts about personality that we find less appealing? Or perhaps enable me to create an alternative narrative about ourselves that we find more comfortable? By controlling the narrative that others see, we mould other people’s perception of us. Every person that we meet has a different perception of others a person; A fractured mirror reflecting aspects of who we truly are. However, with digital technology and social media the pressure to be sociable all day, every day is high. As Turkle says, “…If we are always on, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude.”

The paragraphs talking about the Darwin exhibition and the response of the authors children to a Galapagos tortoise, and the VP at Disney: whose recollection that people complained that biological animals were not as realistic as animatronic creatures in other parts of the park reminded me of Baudrillard’s concept of Simulacra. According to Baudrillard, Western society has entered a fourth phase of the hyperreal. In the age of the hyperreal, the image/ simulation dominates. The age of production has given way to the age of simulation, where products are sold even before they exist. The Simulacrum pervades every level of existence. Children complaining that a real tortoise could be replaced by a robot, and that for them, this will be the preferred option suggests that reality, in their minds at least, must give way to an idealised simulation of it.  
Turkle herself notes that the notion of authenticity has become a fluid one. That reality no longer has the intrinsic value; it is only useful if there is a specific need for it.

Scientists such as David Levy suggest that people will have physical and sexual relationships with robots and that this will be normalised over time. I personally feel but this has shades *of Blade Runner* or even the recent series *Humans*, both of which have an artificially created slave race to do our bidding and give in to our physical and emotional demands.  
 Interestingly, we are at a juncture in technological development but may see the creation of true artificial intelligences within our lifetime. Our relationship with technology is about to radically change and although Levy's suggestion of having relationships with machines seems laughable now, we may see a situation in the near future where people will have a significant emotional connection to the AI’s that they interact with.   
 We already live with AI in our lives such as Alexa or Siri. An entire generation of children is already growing up and interacting with them. Sherry Turkle, in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, said that children's relationship with artificially intelligent machines will interfere with, or in pre-empt, human relationships. Children who grow up relating to AI in lieu of people might not acquire “the equipment for empathic connection.” (Turkle in Madrigal, 2017)  
 This isn't to say that a relationship with a machine or robot could not be beneficial; Turkle herself shows that there could be positive aspects to this. Many who would say that such a relationship isn't real because it is with the machine, but there is a question to be asked: Does it really matter? If the relationship is real to you as a person then how is that any different from relationship with a human? consistently in each of the examples given, it is less about the advantages of intimacy but rather the shortfalls of an organic, messy relationship with a real person and all of the things that come with it. The word that consistently appears throughout is the word ‘predictable’. The robot dog that doesn't die, the lack of judgement from machine; The comfort of connection without the demands of intimacy.  
In other words, they want something that is safe. what they want is the lack of something: Ironically the very thing that's all relationships are founded on. Relationships are intimate things and they leave us very vulnerable: particularly in the case of our relationships with people. We leave ourselves open and trust the other person will not use it against us and vice versa.

There is a phrase that Turkle uses on page 14 “there but not there.” I think this sums up entirety of modern communications, from emails, text, voice calls et cetera. there is a sense that we are connected to something else and that relationships have become yet another task that we have to attend to. In addition, the prevalence and the use of mobile phones etc. in public spaces suggest that we prefer to be alone with the contacts that we choose to make as opposed to the ones that may be forced upon us. At least part of it is the fact that a text or an email can be delayed or ignored altogether allowing us as curators the power to pick and choose how and when we respond or if we respond at all. Phone calls are much more private but also harder to avoid, and I know many people who would far prefer a text than to actually use their phone for what it was originally designed for. For younger people who have grown up with continuous connection, there are layers of relationships that depends upon the hardware that they are using at the time. For example, people on a person’s games console Friends list may not align with the people they associate with on a daily basis, no does it necessarily have any correlation to their Facebook friends or the people that they meet on a daily basis a school, college or university. It is easy nowadays for a person to have many online friends but to still be alone.

in conclusion, with so many relationships that we experience being remote, would a similar relationship with an AI be Any less satisfying to us?  
 Only time will tell.

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