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Review

**Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together:
Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*
(New York: Basic, 2011). 360 pp.**

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Sherry Turkle has distinguished herself as an astute observer of the subjective side of the relationship between people and technology. She serves as Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, where she established and directs the Initiative on Technology and Self. *Alone Together* is the third part of a three-volume series, preceded by *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984) and *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995). The current volume consists of two parts, each with seven chapters, in which Turkle weaves two narratives based on her extensive studies of how people interact with technology.

In the first part, she introduces the narrative of “the robotic moment,” in which advanced robots are used to provide potential “intimacy” for humans who are in solitude. She begins with robot “toys” (Tamagotchis, Furbies, AIBO robot dogs, and My Real Baby), moves on to robots designed for companionship (Paro seals used increasingly in nursing homes), and finishes with discussions of highly interactive robots at MIT. Love and care emerge as major themes. On one hand, there is a debate regarding whether robots can be programmed in a way that will make them adequate caregivers and companions. The question is not whether they can perform dangerous or difficult tasks, but whether they can develop the capacity to appear to care, to love, to be in relationship. On the other hand, there is the question of what these sorts of changes will mean for the human understanding and performance of love. More specific statistics regarding the phenomena she recounts would complement the stories shared from her studies.

Turkle explores in the second part the narrative of being “tethered,” or always connected to communication devices and programs (ranging from text messaging to social networking to virtual reality). She develops several themes here. Identity formation and any fixed understanding of the self faces radical challenges when social networking is understood as performance (shaping who you want people to believe you to be), when virtual reality can serve as practice for real life (or become more real, more desirable, than interaction with real people), and when the Internet provides little forgiveness for mistakes (once a photo is up or a comment has been made, it cannot really be taken back). Today people must carefully navigate their “life mix”: the “mash-up of what you have on- and offline” (160). Also, “how we look and act in the virtual affects our behavior in the real” (223). The Net provides ways of being that shape human expectations for sociability as well as the individual’s ability to be in relationship with others. Communication technology makes connecting easier, but it also encourages shallow interaction and discourages the “intrusion” of something as simple as a phone call (187).

Turkle does an excellent job of bringing out the important questions behind the technologies with which she deals. While many ask the question “Isn’t it better to have grandma be taken care of by a robot than be abandoned?”, she refuses to frame things in that manner, reminding readers that there is something important about human touch, and that we should be

willing to reallocate resources so that the choice is not robots or abandonment. Regarding online connectivity, she brings out how such connection reshapes human relationships and behavior in ways that take away from what it means to be human and be in community. These new connections also take away opportunities for people to learn independence (mom or dad is always a text away) and to be alone and think. The great strength of this work is Turkle's numerous studies and examples, which she is able to narrate in an interesting and thought-provoking manner in order to make the issues clear. For example, she tells stories of children becoming so attached to their non-living electronic pets that they are distraught upon the toy's "death" and insist on purchasing a new one, even though the toy can be reset.

In her conclusion, Turkle attempts to propose a way forward, but this proposal seems somewhat weak in comparison to the forces behind the unreflective advance of technology. While it is helpful to encourage people to "Talk to colleagues down the hall, no cell phones at dinner, on the playground, in the car, or in company...reclaim our concentration...look again toward the virtues of solitude, deliberateness, and living fully in the moment" (296), it is less clear what resources people can draw from in order to successfully make these practical steps. She spends the entire book demonstrating the power of technology to shape humans, but the main weakness of the work is in its attempt (or lack thereof) to combat that shaping power. This is likely due to the fact that such work requires specific families, specific communities, and specific religious traditions to do the hard work of formation that will lead to healthy identity development, relationships, care, and love. For example, Christianity's emphasis on care for the poor, widows, and orphans can be extended creatively to include care for the isolated and lonely. The call to forgive can be applied to the digital realm, where records of mistakes endure.

This book is appropriate for a wide audience and leaves much for theologians and people of faith to ponder. Turkle is an engaging writer, and her stories are interesting, accessible, and thought provoking. Undergraduates studying computer science, sociology, and other related fields will benefit from her examples and deft analysis.