MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Local philosopher examines the definition of friendship by looking at relationships with AI chatbots 01M5ZDSRYSH98X56P577P5PJ99

NINA MOINI: The Second Annual STEM Book Fest took place over the weekend at the Bakken Center in Minneapolis. The festival brings together authors to talk about science, technology, engineering, and math. One of the speakers was Valerie Tiberius, a philosophy professor at the University of Minnesota. She talked about the rise of people forming friendships with artificial intelligence.

Her book, called *Artificially Yours,* explores what happens when people turn to AI chatbots for companionship. And she joins me now. Thanks so much for coming on the show and sharing about your work, Valerie.

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Hi. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: I think a lot of people may not know that this is already happening. Tons and tons of people are having friendships. Some people are having romantic relationships with AI. I mean, what got you interested in this idea of AI and friendship specifically? And how are you exploring that as a philosopher?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Well, I'm a philosopher who most of my work has been on wellbeing, on what it is to live a good human life. And I've been really interested in what the role of human friendship is in living a good life because I think it's pretty crucial. And then all of a sudden, I started seeing these headlines in the newspapers and magazines about people replacing their girlfriends with chatbots and women saying, my AI friend is just so much easier and more available than my human friends.

And I thought-- my first thought was, this is the absolute end of the world. But I ended up talking to people who are younger than I am about the topic, and they persuaded me that there's actually-- there is something good about these chatbot friendships. And that led me to be confused, which led me to think there's something interesting to say here. So that was kind of the trajectory.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I mean, when you were talking to folks who were like, hey, this isn't so bad, what were they telling you that they gain from these relationships that maybe people may not be able to offer? Obviously, they're available.

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Yeah. So one of the big things is people who need comfort or support and who will very plainly say, my human friends are not always available, and I also don't always want to burden them. So to be able to talk to a chatbot who can talk you down from an anxiety spiral at 3:00 in the morning when your friends are sleeping, a lot of people have found that useful. So those kinds of-- I would say, what the chatbot companions are good for is temporarily reducing anxious feelings, making us feel like we have somebody who's-- "somebody--" something that's listening to us, a little bit like almost a therapist in that way.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I wonder if that is a good thing, when you put on your philosophy hat. [LAUGHS] Is it good for someone to have that to reach for at 3:00 in the morning, or is it kind of like walking to the fridge and grabbing a snack?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Yes, exactly. So I think that is the crucial and interesting philosophical question. And what I think is that there is something that is good, just basically absolutely good, about human relationships, which has to do with our mutual love or concern or care for each other. So if you and I were friends-- I don't know you, so I can't-- we're not yet, but if we were, it would mean that I care about you for your own sake, and you care how I'm doing for my own sake. And that's what you miss with chatbots. They do not care about you. They don't care about anything in that way that human beings do.

So my thinking is that, if relying on the chatbots turns you off of real people, if you start to replace your real friendships with these easygoing, nonjudgmental, always encouraging computer programs, that's a bad thing. But I don't think it's a bad thing to use it sometimes to pick up your mood when you're feeling down, as long as you don't sacrifice those important human relationships where you have that mutual regard.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And what about the role of disagreement, friction-- you're talking a lot about the support and the ability of just having somebody there. But, again, through sitting around and thinking about this from a philosophical standpoint, which many people are right now, how important is it to have friction sometimes in friendships or any relationships?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Absolutely. I think it's tremendously important. I mean, if you have a friendship with someone where there's never any sort of friction and they just agree with you all the time and tell you how wonderful you are, think about how boring that would be in your life to just have--

NINA MOINI: Robotic, almost.

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Yes, absolutely. Yes, exactly. So friction-- I think friction is actually part-- I think it's enjoyable to have some friction. And I also think, even when it's not enjoyable, we learn something from the friction that we have with our friends. Sometimes there's friction because you do something that your friend thinks was not great and they let you know. Hopefully, they let you know in a nice way.

But in that way, you can learn something about yourself, about how you might improve as a friend or become a better person. So that's the kind of thing that-- currently, the way chatbots are so obsequious. They're just sort of like, oh yes, you're so wonderful. You're so great. Aren't you amazing? You're not going to get that mirror that you can use to improve your self-knowledge and improve yourself.

NINA MOINI: Through your work, are you starting to feel worried about people choosing AI companions over human relationships? Or did you feel like this is going to get out of control pretty fast? Or were you feeling more like, well, there's a lot of positives here? Or is it a combination?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Yeah. I started out so against it, and I was drawn to think, OK, I shouldn't be a complete naysayer. So I was drawn a bit more to the middle. But I do have some fears. And actually, one of the people at the Book Fest at the Bakken Museum asked me what my biggest fear is, and it really has to do with children.

When I looked at the social science research, the statistics on how people use these companion chatbots, it doesn't seem like most adult humans are replacing their human friends. They use the AI as a supplement, and I think that's OK.

But children, if children are using these chatbot companions while they're still developing, and they get the sense that the kind of relationship you should aim to have in life is one that has no friction, that has somebody who's always telling you you're awesome and wonderful, that requires no sacrifice, that doesn't require you to take another person's perspective, that, to me, would be kind of a disaster. So I think the kind of fear that you're asking me about is-- it's focused on the younger generation at the moment.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And also, with the emotional attachments, like-- again, thinking of this through a philosophy lens. Does it matter if the person feels the relationship is real, even if the chatbot doesn't have feelings of its own?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Wow, that's a great question. Were you a philosophy major? That's a really good question. So I think it does matter, but it's actually controversial in philosophy. But I do think it matters. I think even if you're-- I mean, OK, so first of all, most people who have relationships with these chatbots, they are fully aware that it's not a person and that it doesn't have feelings.

But there are some people who are kind of in full-blown delusions about it. They've taken the enchantment too far, and they lose touch of the fact that it isn't a person and start believing it has feelings. I think that something is lost when that happens, because I think the thing that human beings, given how we evolved and who we are by our nature-- real relationships with people are what's good for us. And if we don't get that, even if we don't know we don't get it, it's still bad for us. So think about if you're married and your spouse is cheating on you, but you don't know because they're good at hiding it. My thought is it's still bad for you.

NINA MOINI: It's still going on.

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Yeah, even if you don't know about it. So it's a case like that, I think.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. Thanks for giving us so many more ways to think about all this. Just lastly, Valerie, you talked about your book, *Artificial Yours,* over the weekend at the STEM Book Fest we mentioned. Was there anything that surprised you about people's reactions to it or any surprising questions that you got?

VALERIE TIBERIUS: So one person did ask me how we know that the machine doesn't have feelings. That's a question that I do talk about in the book, but I was surprised to get asked it at the festival because it's such an incredibly difficult question. I mean, the experts on these topics haven't figured it out, and there are about 200 different theories about what would make it the case that a machine could have consciousness or subjective feelings or its own perspective. There's just so little consensus about that. So that was a surprise to me to get asked about that.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. That's coming maybe in part 2 of your next book. Thank you so much, Valerie, for your time. We appreciate it.

VALERIE TIBERIUS: Thank you. I enjoyed talking to you.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. Valerie Tiberius is a professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Philosophy.