

(In lieu of a proper)

Review of Sherry Turkle's 2010 *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.

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I've read the first chapter now of the book. I had great hopes, after reading some reviews and blurbs, hopes which are now beginning to dissolve. After the first chapter I can say that Sherry Turkle clearly has an agenda in the book, but truth-seeking is not on it. Her prejudices are painfully obvious from page one. They show in content as well as in style. The latter is a clever and biased exploitation of semantic prosodies. Here's an example of a content related issue.

On page 19, Turkle writes: "On our mobile devices, we often talk to each other on the move and with little disposable time -- so little, in fact, that we communicate in a new language of abbreviation in which letters stand for words and emoticons for feelings. We don't ask the open ended "How are you?" Instead, we ask the more limited "Where are you?" and "What's up?" These are good questions for getting someone's location and making a simple plan. They are not so good for opening a dialogue about complexity of feeling".

There're a few problems here, actually, but I'll just pick on one. One does not need to be a linguist to understand that "How are you?", far from being an 'open question', is actually about a conversational vista furthest from openness. Indeed, pragmatically speaking, this is a completely closed question, not very different from a so-called rhetorical question, which does not really require an answer. In this case, according to US sociolinguistic rules of too much notoriety for Turkle to be ignorant of, only one answer is expected, and therefore the information it brings, in terms of Shannon, is exactly zero. Thus, both of the texting questions provided by Turkle are actually much more open than the one which is supposedly the epitome of f2f caring. Briefly: "How are you?" as a question 'about complexity of feeling'?! Surely, Turkle must be pulling our leg here :-) ROTFL...

Reading through Turkle... Slowly... Chapter 5, Complicities, is about how children (5-12 yrs) react to AI robots; that they mostly want love and affect from them because they fail to get them in their RL from their family. A very touching read, but mostly because of some psychological insight than technological. Towards the end of the chapter, on page 101, Turkle says:

"Even My Real Baby was marketed as a robot that could teach your child "socialization". I am skeptical. I believe that sociable technology will always disappoint because it promises what it cannot deliver. It promises friendship but can only deliver performances. Do we really want to be in the business of manufacturing friends that will never be friends?"

Hmmm. Just thinking aloud: whatever do we get from humans beyond performances? What are other ways to find out about friendship than from performances. How can we know what they think and feel without their performances? Can we cognize all this telepathically? We induce our knowledge and understanding of the world and creatures in it from their performances. There is no other way, is there? These performances may be deceptive, both because they were intentionally made this way by the performers (lying) or because we misconstrued what we see performed (illusion). Either way, there's no other method to find out about the others than via their performances.

If this is so, what is the meaning of Turkle's "only"? What else can humans and robots deliver, in her view? We're not told, of course. I believe Turkle is trying (again) to play out the negative semantic prosody of "performance" as something untrue, artificial, theatrical. But using this sense/connotation of the term in the present context is not only unwarranted; it's also positively misleading to the reader. Does Turke WANT to mislead? How can I know? All evidence I've got at hand is her (written) performance :-). For all I know, then, she could even be a robot...

"If we start to call online spaces where we are with other people 'communities', it is easy to forget what that word used to mean. From its derivation, it literally means "to give among each other". [...] But we have come to a point at which it is near heresy to suggest that MySpace or Facebook or Second Life is not a community. [...] Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways. [...] What do we owe to each other in simulation?" (pages 238-239).

Again, like before, there are many problems here... And, like before, they seem to all flow from the same source: Turkle's blinding negative bias against human interaction in virtual communities. Again, like before, because I'm not writing a formal review of the book, I'll be maximally brief and just itemize the points of contention:

(i) A minor linguistic point first. Here's etymology of 'community' from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=community>: ***late 14c., from O.Fr. *comunité* "community, commonness, everybody" (Mod.Fr. *communauté*), from L. *communitatem* (nom. *communitas*) "community, fellowship," from *communis* "common, public, general, shared by all or many," (see *common*). Latin *communitatem* "was merely a noun of quality ... meaning 'fellowship, community of relations or feelings,' but in med.L. it was, like *universitas*, used concretely in the sense of 'a body of fellows or fellow-townsmen' " [OED]. An O.E. word for "community" was *gemanscipe* "community, fellowship, union, common ownership," probably composed from the same PIE roots as *communis*. Community service as a criminal sentence is recorded from 1972, Amer.Eng. Community college is recorded from 1959.*** I fail to see the 'giving' sense which Turkle mentions?

(ii) Turkle seems to believe that 'what that word used to mean' is or should be its current meaning, because (presumably) the sense of the word got somehow corrupted over time, and especially due to its use in the context of the virtual. That language (and world) was once better than it is now is a common enough illusion, especially among not-so-young people. It is psychologically excusable, of course. Methodologically, however, it is serious error.

(iii) It is not possible to make a statement to the effect that 'MySpace or Facebook or Second Life is not a community' or its opposite with any degree of scientific rigour. One reason why not is rather obvious: all three places are different things to different people, so it does not make much sense to take some averages and make blanket statements. It would make much more sense here if Turkle said something like: 'so many 5 SL users go there mainly for the community spirit, according to their own reports'. Data like this is available from past research, but Turkle does not quote any.

(iv) Why should communities of necessity be 'constituted by physical proximity' only is beyond me, frankly, so I'll not even try to analyze this claim. All I can say, as a resident of both FB and SL, is that for me this is rather blatantly untrue. And I can assure the reader that the 'shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities' present in those environments are felt as not a bit less 'real' than in the so-called Real Life. It would take too much space to exemplify this here. Best drop in SL for a stroll and we'll talk, OK?

(v) Finally, in asking 'What do we owe to each other in simulation?' Turkle clearly confuses the (simulated) environment with pixellated avatars, trees and beaches with the (real) people behind these avatars. My feeling of regret and anger at having lost some 'simulated' property of zero material value (but high sentimental value) to grieving in SL is as real (to me) as anything could be. So is, I'm certain, the feeling of empathy from the community I'm in. Likewise the time, effort and money they might expend in giving me some replacement property. And my feeling of gratitude to them for this. What do we owe to each other in simulation? Lol. Exactly what we do outside of it.

I finished reading Turkle, but I still do not know "why we expect more from technology and less from each other"... Assuming that I was reading with understanding and concentration, this must be a rather serious setback for the author, no? After all, the 'why' appears on the cover and is part of the book title. Not that the blurb or testimonials ever promise the answer, but I still feel deceived. In the twenty-one enthusiastic reviews of the book on Amazon I could likewise not find any reference to this 'why' or its answer. So I still do not know whence the threatening state of affairs Turkle is painting... Is it mainly that technology is growing more mature and allows us to expect more from it? Are we humans getting less and less supportive of each other (why)? Is it some kind of synergy between the two trends? If so, what are the causal mechanisms of this synergy? Why? Why? Why?

In her final chapter, Conclusions, Turkle's summary-cum-envoi simply reiterates most of her fears, hang-ups and premonitions. There's no answer to the 'why' question here, either. Let me draw a few representative excerpts from this chapter, titled "necessary conversations" and briefly comment, using the cursory style of my previous reflections on Turkle's book. This will give me at least a vestige of the feeling of closure...

While neither "Matrix" nor the name of Wachowski brothers appears in the index to the book, their spirit hovers heavily all over it. Consider this bit from the first page of the concluding chapter: "Now we know that once computers connected us to each other, once we became tethered to the network, we really didn't need to keep computers busy. *They keep us busy*. It is as though we have become their killer app". This fragment is very characteristic of Turkle's emotional fear-talk. This is how she builds tension. As a stylistic device it's actually quite brilliant, but in lieu of arguments? Just a dab at deconstructing this passage: (i) did computers connect us, or did we use computers to connect?, (ii) are we tethered to the network, or are we tethered to each other via the network?, (iii) Do computers keep us busy (original emphasis), or do we keep ourselves busy via the computer channel, or with the use of computer as tool?, (iv) Are we (in our social networks) really computers' killer app, or do they have much more time-consuming tasks to do, such as manufacture of goods, power network control or flight control?

Another Turkle's mantra is that 'tethered to the network' we unavoidably flatten our 'true' face-to-face relations. Well, maybe my personal purview here is just subjectively tinted with pessimism, but the horrors of wired relations Turkle amply discusses remind me of everyday f2f communication. A short quote from page 280: "we easily find 'company' but are exhausted by the pressures of performance. We [...] rarely have each other's full attention. [...] We have many new encounters but may come to experience them as tentative, to be put 'on hold' if better ones come along." In search for better, 'deeper' human communication and understanding isn't Turkle looking back to the mythical realm of, say Victorian England, or pre-revolutionary American South, the way she imagines them? Yes, the good ol' days tend to seem to us much slower, people nicer, conversations more meaningful... This, I'm afraid, is simply an old person's illusion. To build scientific arguments on such illusions is misleading, to say the least.

In the robotic thread weaving through Turkle's book she keeps reminding the reader that, despite what her child and senile subjects told her during her research, robots, however high their AI and

however soft their skin or fur, are ultimately just cold automatons. In her conclusions, Turkle writes (page 282): "We animate robotic creatures by projecting meaning onto them and are thus tempted to speak of their emotions and even their 'authenticity'". Now, change one word here: 'robotic' to 'human' and you've got an excerpt from a psychology 101 course textbook, lesson one. As I mentioned this issue before, I'll simply reiterate: humans have no other way to make sense of the world than to project it. We'll never know for sure how other humans feel or what they think at any one moment; we can only surmise that on the basis of our projections of the type: "I'd think/feel this under the circumstances, so s/he probably thinks/feels this, too". Likewise with robots. Turkle's flat denial that "the robot can feel nothing at all" is completely ungrounded; not even problematized or nuanced in any way. Oh, by the way, Turkle is using the term 'robot' persistently, no doubt for its (negative) rhetorical/pragmatic connotations. There're many other, more axiologically neutral terms she could have been using. This simply cannot be by accident.

We've talked about psychology; let's talk biology and chemistry. On page 286 Turkle writes: "Things start innocently: neuroscientists want to study attachment. But things end reductively, with claims that a robot 'knows' how to form attachments because it has the algorithms. The dream of today's roboticists is no less than to reverse engineer love. Are we indifferent to whether we are loved by robots or by our own kind?". So, reduction in science is nocent, right? How do humans learn to form attachments? Presumably by a clever combination of evolutionary biology and (brain) chemistry. We start early, probably in the womb, and we still know rather little about the process, but we do know one thing: without brains there's no attachment and there's no love. And we know another thing: without chemistry there're no brains. We're now beginning to decipher this chemistry. Once in full swing, it took just a few years to dissect the entire human genome, another (horrible dictu) reductive fundament of what we are as humans. How long will it take before we can actually pinpoint love to a chemical acting on some synapses in one pretty well defined angle of our brains? (We're well on our way there now, btw). We will have reverse engineered love. In humans. We'll then inject the same chemical in the robot's brain (by then robotic brains will not be silicon-based), and it'll start loving us. So... what will be the difference? Oh, btw: I intensely dislike phrases of the "our own kind" sort... I wonder why?

This is probably repetitive, but then much of Turkle is repetitive. On page 289 she opines: "The first manifestations of today's 'push-back' are tentative experiments to do without the Net. But the Net has become intrinsic to getting an education, getting the news, and getting a job". Why is it that Turkle obstinately reifies, nay -- personifies, the net (now in lower case)? 'Living without the net' simply means living with fewer people than with the net. It is people we connect to via the net, rather than us connecting *with* the net, right? We connect with more people this way than we could ever have dreamed to do without the net (on the quality of these connections I wrote above). Surely, in and of itself, there's nothing wrong with that? And with the fact that we *use* the net to connect to people about our education, news and jobs? The net itself does not provide or offer these; people do via the net. If we get better choice and quality of all these commodities from people over the net, what exactly is wrong with that? But *do* we get better? This is one of those questions Turkle does not answer. And I said answer, not intuit.

Turkle is an idealist. We should all be caring and loving toward each other. We should take care of our elderly parents, before, through and past their senility. We should have unlimited time and patience for our offspring. With friends we should have deep relations and frequent conferences. Robots and the web take, nay -- yank, us away from them into some kind of cold, mechanized, automated void, which will ultimately be our undoing. Well... what can one say to this, the very bottom line of Turkle's text? I would say: yes, these are beautiful dreams, but however much we try to improve ourselves, there'll be abandoned kids and seniles. There'll always be too little caring and love (maybe because we're simply never satiated when it comes to these?). There'll always be too little attention and free time. And it has always been this way, despite our mythical sentimental

illusions of the golden age of humanity. So, now what? Should we stop pinning our hopes on computers, robots and the web to give us what we still realistically can get? Should we ban all research in AI and computer science, and divert the funds to psychotherapy? If developing a loving robot is "transgressive, a 'forbidden experiment'" (page 291), then this is exactly what we should be doing. I beg to question the premise, however. And if the premise is false, so is the conclusion. The boundary between Turkle's idealism and fanaticism is thin: "We don't need to reject or disparage technology. We need to put it in its place" (page 294-5).

"We will begin with very simple things. Some will seem like just reclaiming good manners. Talk to colleagues down the hall, no cell phones at dinner, on the playground, in the car, or in company". Good manners? That brings to mind another technological break-through: the (wired) telephone. With some research it'd be easy enough to find similar 'good manners' precepts issued by paterfamilias more than a hundred years ago: no phone at dinner or in company! The technology was new and disruptive, but immensely enticing and addictive: talking to friends and family over distance! Right now! Not via letters, which could take a few weeks to exchange... With some more research we could probably unearth adverts of clinicians promising effective therapy against this new terrible addiction. I know: this is *reductio ad absurdum*, a rather facile eristic device. But, with all Turkle's zest, I guess I just could not stop myself :-). Turkle is an expert discussant. Her style is flawless. She is passionate. She knows how to use her data. Why, then, while reading her book, am I incessantly reminded of His Majesty's quip to Mozart extolling the virtues of his 'Nozze di Fagaro': "You're passionate, Mozart... But you fail to persuade."?

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