

educating selves in a tech addicted age.

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abstract

In this paper we argue that, if it is true that maximum self-development is better both for individuals and society, and if it is true that that self-development is being seriously curtailed by pervasive environmental tech forces, then clearly educational systems, since they are guardians of “developing” young humans, have a moral imperative to push back against forces that diminish the self. On the other hand, if it is *not* true that “more self is always better,” that perhaps “goodness of fit” between self and society is optimum, then education systems are justified in continuing to pay scant attention to the forces of self-development (or lack thereof). In line with Sherry Turkle’s (2011) argument that tech forces are diminishing the sort of reflective reasoning necessary for self-development, we will argue that since communicative interchange is necessary for self-development, and an ever-developing self is necessary for ever deeper and more meaningful dialogue (hence forming a dialectic), the fact that social media and other forms of tech connection stunts deep and meaningful interchange has serious implications. Specifically, we will argue that, in contemporary high-tech society (what we are calling Society 2.0), the dialectic between self and communication is going the “wrong” way; that genuine dialogue is becoming ever more rare, which in turn is resulting in “diminished-I’s,” which in turn is resulting in ever more complacency in the face of utterly superficial communicative interchange. We will begin with an overview of what we mean by a “diminished-I,” and then follow by noting how social media, the reading vacuum, roboticism, crowd communication, and decreasing social capital are resulting in diminished-I’s. Since this is resulting in an “I-diminished” society, we will reflect on the question of whether those dialogical educational initiatives that promote self-development are, in fact, making dodos, i.e., making youngsters unfit for the environment in which they find themselves. Ultimately, we will argue that, if educators choose to fight back against the I-diminishing forces of Society 2.0, they need to *take selves seriously* and actively engage youngsters in dialogue with those with opposing viewpoints. Ultimately, youngsters in Society 2.0 will need all the assistance educators can muster to fight the addictive, literally mind-numbing forces of being “happily” “alone together,” and instead chose the riskier often unhappy-making option of diving into the truth-seeking process with varying coalitions of the willing.

keywords: education and self-development; increasing dimensionality; dialogue and self-development; technology addiction.

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educando a si mesmos em uma era viciada em tecnologia.

resumo

Neste artigo, argumentamos que, se é verdade que o autodesenvolvimento máximo é melhor tanto para os indivíduos quanto para a sociedade, e se é verdade que esse autodesenvolvimento está sendo seriamente restringido por forças tecnológicas ambientais ubíquas, então, claramente, os sistemas educacionais, uma vez que eles são os guardiões do “desenvolvimento” dos jovens, têm um imperativo moral de resistir às forças que diminuem o eu. Por outro lado, se não é verdade que “mais eu é sempre melhor”, que talvez a “bondade do ajuste” (*goodness of fit*) entre o eu e a sociedade seja ótima, então os sistemas educacionais são justificados em continuar a prestar pouca atenção às forças do autodesenvolvimento (ou falta dele). Em consonância com o argumento de Sherry Turkle (2011) de que as forças tecnológicas estão diminuindo o tipo de raciocínio reflexivo necessário para o autodesenvolvimento, argumentamos que, uma vez que trocas comunicativas são necessárias para o autodesenvolvimento, e um eu em constante desenvolvimento é necessário para um desenvolvimento cada vez mais profundo e um diálogo mais significativo (portanto, formando uma dialética), o fato de que a mídia social e outras formas de conexão tecnológica impedem um intercâmbio profundo e significativo tem sérias implicações. Especificamente, argumentamos que, na sociedade contemporânea de alta tecnologia (o que estamos chamando de Sociedade 2.0), a dialética entre eu (self) e comunicação está indo para o lado “errado”; que o diálogo genuíno está se tornando cada vez mais raro, o que, por sua vez, está resultando em “eus diminuídos”, o que, por sua vez, está resultando em cada vez mais complacência diante do intercâmbio comunicativo totalmente superficial. Começamos com uma visão geral do que queremos dizer com um “eu diminuído” e, em seguida, observamos como as mídias sociais, o vácuo de leitura, o robotismo, a comunicação coletiva e a diminuição do capital social estão resultando em “eus diminuídos”. Como isso está resultando em uma sociedade “diminuída”, refletiremos se essas iniciativas educativas dialógicas que promovem o autodesenvolvimento estão, de fato, fazendo dodôs, ou seja, tornando os jovens inaptos para o meio em que se encontram. Em última análise, argumentamos que, se os educadores escolherem lutar contra as forças que diminuem o eu da Sociedade 2.0, eles precisam levar os eus (*selves*) a sério e envolver ativamente os jovens no diálogo com aqueles com pontos de vista opostos. Em última análise, os jovens na Sociedade 2.0 precisarão de toda a assistência que os educadores puderem reunir para combater as forças viciantes e literalmente entorpecentes de estar “felizmente” “sozinhos” e, em vez disso, escolher a opção mais arriscada e muitas vezes infeliz de mergulhar no processo de busca da verdade com várias coalizões de disposições.

palavras-chave: educação e autodesenvolvimento; dimensionalidade crescente; diálogo e autodesenvolvimento; vício em tecnologia.

educar los yoes en una era adicta a la tecnología.

resumen

En este artículo sostenemos que, si es cierto que el máximo autodesarrollo es mejor tanto para los individuos como para la sociedad, y si es cierto que ese autodesarrollo está siendo seriamente restringido por las fuerzas tecnológicas ambientales que todo lo impregnan, entonces claramente los sistemas educativos, en tanto son guardianes de los jóvenes humanos "en desarrollo", tienen un imperativo moral de oponerse a las fuerzas que disminuyen al yo. Por otro lado, si *no* es cierto que "más yo es siempre mejor", que tal vez la "calidad del ajuste" entre el yo y la sociedad es óptima, entonces los sistemas educativos están justificados a seguir prestando poca atención a las fuerzas del autodesarrollo (o la falta de ellas). En consonancia con el argumento de Sherry Turkle (2011) de que las fuerzas tecnológicas están disminuyendo el tipo de razonamiento reflexivo necesario para el autodesarrollo, argumentaremos que, dado que el intercambio comunicativo es necesario para el autodesarrollo, y que un yo en constante desarrollo es necesario para un diálogo cada vez más profundo y significativo (por lo tanto, formando una dialéctica), el hecho de que las redes sociales y otras formas de conexión tecnológica atrofien el intercambio profundo y significativo tiene serias consecuencias. En concreto, argumentaremos que, en la actual sociedad de alta tecnología (lo que llamamos Sociedad 2.0), la dialéctica entre el yo y la comunicación va por el camino "equivocado"; que el diálogo genuino es cada vez más raro, lo que a su vez da lugar a "yoes disminuidos", que a su vez da lugar a una complacencia cada vez mayor ante un intercambio comunicativo totalmente superficial. Comenzaremos con un repaso general de lo que entendemos por un "yo disminuido", y después señalaremos cómo las redes sociales, el vacío de lectura, el robotismo, la comunicación de masas y la disminución del capital social están dando lugar a yoes disminuidos. Puesto que esto está dando lugar a una sociedad "yo-disminuida", reflexionaremos sobre la cuestión de si aquellas iniciativas educativas dialógicas que promueven el autodesarrollo están, de hecho, fabricando dodos, es decir, haciendo jóvenes inaptos para el entorno en el que se encuentran. En última instancia, argumentaremos que, si los educadores deciden luchar contra las fuerzas reductoras del yo de la sociedad 2.0, *deben tomarse en serio a los yoes* y comprometer activamente a los jóvenes en diálogos con quienes tienen puntos de vista opuestos. En última instancia, los jóvenes en la Sociedad 2.0 necesitarán toda la ayuda que los educadores puedan reunir para luchar contra las adictivas y soporíferas fuerzas de estar "felizmente" "solos juntos", y en su lugar elegir la opción más arriesgada y a menudo más infeliz de sumergirse en el proceso de búsqueda de la verdad con diversas coaliciones de voluntarios.

palabras clave: educación y autodesarrollo; aumento de la dimensionalidad; diálogo y autodesarrollo; adicción a la tecnología.

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introduction

Self-development is a matter of degree. It can be described as varying as a function of perspective-taking (Mead 1934, Gardner 1981, 1998), dimensionality (Piaget, 1969), the capacity for second-order reflection (Frankfurt, 1971), the capacity for reflective self-governance (Dewey, 2007), in terms of a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), and so on.

In what is to follow, we will take the claim that “self-development is a matter of degree” as a given. What we would like to examine are two associated assumptions: namely (1) that with regard to the self, “more is better”; and (2) that self-development “just happens” and, therefore, need not be perceived as a central responsibility of education systems.

Clearly these two assumptions are not unrelated. If it is true that maximum self-development is better both for individuals and the society in which they live, and if it is the case that self-development is being seriously curtailed by pervasive environmental forces, then clearly educational systems, since they are guardians of developing young humans, have a moral imperative to push back against forces that diminish the self.

On the other hand, it may be the case that we ought not to accept that “more self” is better. It may be that we ought, instead, to accept that “optimal” self-development is context-dependent; that “optimal” is a function of “goodness of fit” or, in Darwinian terms, adaptation to one’s surroundings. Thus, if the context is such that self-reflection renders an individual an outcast, ensures deep unhappiness, or worse, puts the individual in mortal danger, and if it is the case that wide-spread individual self-development begins to tear the social fabric apart, it may be that we ought to get comfortable with the notion that, in such an environment, diminished selves are a good thing. If this is the case, then it would follow that education systems ought to continue

what they presently do and pay scant attention to the forces of self-development (or lack thereof).

Sherry Turkle, in her book *Alone Together* (2011), paints a picture of a tech-crazy world in which not only is it not at all clear that there will be space for self-reflective reasoning, but, worse, that a propensity for self-reflective reasoning may become an existential threat, as it was for the protagonist in *Brave New World* (1998).

Falling in line with Turkle's argument, we will make the claim that tech-addiction, that is interfering with human connection, is reaching pandemic proportions, and that it is precisely this "aloneness" that is stunting selves. That is, since communicative interchange is necessary for self-development³, and an ever-developing self is necessary for ever deeper and more meaningful dialogue (hence forming a dialectic), the fact that social media, and other forms of tech connection, stunt deep and meaningful interchange has serious implications. Specifically, we will argue that, in contemporary high-tech society (what we are calling Society 2.0), the dialectic between self and communication is going the "wrong" way; that genuine dialogue is becoming ever more rare, which, in turn, is resulting in "diminished-I's," which, in turn, is resulting in ever more complacency in the face of utterly superficial communicative interchange, which, in turn, is resulting in the sort of diminished-I's that celebrate superficiality. In Society 2.0, in other words, we are becoming, as Turkle's title suggests, truly "alone together."

Since we will be arguing that pervasive connection to technology is resulting in "diminished-I's," we will begin by an overview of what we mean by a "diminished-I." This will be followed by noting how social media, the reading vacuum, roboticism, crowd communication, and decreasing social capital are resulting in diminished-I's. We will then move to the anchor question by having a deeper look at whether a "diminished-I" is really so bad after all. In other words, we will look seriously at the

³ Mead (1934) argued that self-consciousness *as such* develops because of, and only because of, communicative interaction. Without interaction, there would be no self-consciousness – a theory that is empirically supported by experiment carried out by Gallup (1977) who showed that the self-consciousness evident in chimps as measured by mirror-related activities is absent in chimps that are raised in isolation, i.e., alone!

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question of whether those rare educational initiatives that promote self-development through engaging students in self-reflection are, in fact, making Dodos, i.e., making youngsters unfit for the environment in which they find themselves.

Ultimately, we will argue that, if education systems choose to fight back against the I-diminishing forces of Society 2.0, they need a clear recognition of the society in which they educate, and so realize, at a profound level, that focusing on reflective or critical thinking, or big ideas, or whatever the latest buzz words popular in higher educational echelons, just won't cut it. If education systems choose to fight back against the I-diminishing forces of Society 2.0, they need to *take selves seriously* (Gardner, 2011)⁴ and so go to great lengths to ensure that youngsters in their care know what is at stake. Students need to understand that if they choose to engage in the process of self-development, they will have to not only get comfortable with, but actively seek out, being together and genuinely interacting with others under the demanding taskmaster of "truth-seeking" – with all its ups and downs. Ultimately, youngsters in Society 2.0 will need all the assistance educators can muster to fight the addictive, literally mind-numbing forces of being "happily" "alone together,"⁵ and instead choose the riskier often unhappy-making option of diving into the truth-seeking process with varying coalitions of the willing.

a "diminished-i": lack of differentiation

A self can be viewed as more or less developed (or diminished) as a function of an individual's capacity for perspective-taking. Thus:

In terms of a developmental continuum, the initial or most primitive position of an individual's perspective-taking capacity can be described - using one of Piaget's terms - as "egocentric," i.e., viewing the world strictly from one's own point of view. In theory the opposite pole is held

⁴ In his book *Democracy and Education* (2007), John Dewey likewise argues that *personality transformation* ought to be the focus of our schools. He argues that primary/secondary schooling systems that focus mainly on information transfer and preparation for the workplace have lost their legitimacy. It is critical, rather, that schooling systems recognize that, whether they like it or not, they are in the business of self-creation.

⁵ Note the parallels here with *Brave New World* in which happiness was the sovereign good, rather than, e.g., the refinement of self-consciousness (Huxley, 1998, p. 177).

down by the *regulative ideal* of being able to view any given situation from an infinite number of perspectives, i.e., a God's eye view. In between these two poles, again in concurrence with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, it can be presumed that the capacity for perspective-taking or what is sometimes referred to as differentiation grows in a stepwise progression. (Gardner, 1998, p. 1)

According to this view, then, a diminished-I would reveal itself as someone who is egocentric in the cognitive sense, as unable to get beyond her own perspective, or as someone who might be referred to as “undifferentiated,” or, as it were, relatively simple.

The suggestion that a “diminished-I” can be described as one that is less differentiated concurs with Harry Frankfurt’s argument (1971) that a self doesn’t truly become a “person” (p. 10) until that individual has the capacity to develop second-order volitions, i.e., not just the capacity to reflect on one’s wants, but the capacity to reflect on whether one should want what one wants. This capacity to evaluate one’s own wants can be viewed as a second-order perspective.

Frankfurt contrasts “persons” with what he refers to as “wantons,” those who simply pursue whatever course of action they are most strongly inclined to pursue, who do not care which of their inclinations is the strongest (p. 11).⁶ The wanton appears to have “no identity apart from his first-order desires.” (p. 3). A “wanton,” then, can be characterized as someone with a low-level capacity for perspective taking.

Herbert Marcuse would describe perspective-taking in terms of dimensionality. Thus Marcuse, in his 1969 book *One Dimensional Man*, would describe the “wanton” as one dimensional in the sense that such an individual has no inner dimension, i.e., no critical power of reasoning (p. 11); no source of self-determination (p. 49); an inability to make judgements (p. 99). “The ‘inner’ dimension of the mind is whittled down” (p. 10). The “private” has become “public” as is evidenced by, amongst other things, the

⁶ Here, again, there are parallels with *Brave New World* in which all members of the Fordian civilization are encouraged to follow their inclinations. “Impulse arrested spills over, the flood is feeling . . . and the flood is even madness. . . . Feeling lurks in the interval of time between desire and its consummation.” The goal must be to shorten the interval. (pp. 43-44)

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lack of privacy in general⁷ (note: this was written before the onset of social media) and the lack of sexual privacy⁸ (including forbearance) in particular.⁹

the forces that diminish the “i.”

What is particularly interesting about the title of Turkle’s book *Alone Together* (2011), is the juxtaposition of those two words. How can one be both “alone” and “together”? This question is not dissimilar to the one that is prompted by Riesman et al.’s book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) written more than a half century ago. How can we be both “lonely” and in a “crowd”? The answer that both books suggest is that our culture nudges us to cleave so closely to one another that there is a very real sense in which we as unique autonomous or “inner-directed”¹⁰ individuals fade away.¹¹ That is, though highly attuned to one another, we can nonetheless be described as being alone in the sense in which there is almost no “I” available to enter into the sort of “I-Thou” relationship that, for Buber (1958), was the epitome to which humans can strive.

The specific factors that potentially inhibit the capacity for “inner direction” that we will touch on here are social media, the “reading vacuum,” our growing enthusiasm for robotic amelioration, crowd communication, and decreasing social capital.

I. the “i-diminishing force” of social media.

It appears that technology is changing us as humans, and this is particularly so for digital natives (Turkle, 2011, p. xii). This is hardly surprising, given the degree to

⁷ Turkle would agree with Marcuse’s observation that “Solitude, the very condition which sustains the individual against and beyond his society, has become technically impossible” (p. 71).

⁸ Marcuse refers to our rampant sexualized society as “institutionalized desublimation” (p. 74). “The mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance. And the Happy Consciousness comes to prevail” (p. 79).

⁹ Note too, again, the parallels with *Brave New World* in which privacy is frowned upon. “We don’t encourage them to engage in any solitary amusements” (p. 163).

¹⁰ Riesman et al. suggested that while a personality type that emerged from being directed by tradition was “inner directed,” individuals who are “other directed,” i.e., those who get their bearings from what others think, consume and feel survive better in the intricate organization that is required by mass society.

¹¹ Here, too, the parallels with *Brave New World* (1998) are profound. “Everyone belongs to everybody else,” (p. 40) but people are never lonely (p. 128).

which technology is, for many, a constant companion. Thus, for instance, CNN reported a study that showed that the average US teen spends 7 hours/day with their eyes glued to a screen, and that doesn't include homework (Rogers, 2019). As a result of this need to "be in touch," Turkle argues that youngsters are seduced "into narcissistic ways of relating to the world (p. 179), by which she means "a personality so fragile that it needs constant support" (p. 172). This kind of self instability, or what we are referring to as a diminished-I, would seem inevitable, given the fact that the selves of digital natives are largely "made up" for publishing purposes;¹² on social networks, people are flattened into personae—reduced to their profiles (p. 18). Turkle argues that loving your avatar (p. 193), or your profile (p. 18), just isn't the same as learning to love a self-grown, self-developed self. Thus, in describing this new state of self, Turkle uses the phrase "Tethered and Marked Absent" (p.155) which seems apt, given the research that portrays Americans as increasingly insecure, isolated, and lonely (p. 157). Turkle describes loneliness as failed solitude¹³ (p. 188). To be at peace with solitude, you must be able to summon yourself to yourself (p. 88), however, if the self is vanishingly small, solitude will be beyond reach. And so, a vicious circle is created, a lonely small self will become ever more dependent on technological tethering which, in turn, locks the self into its diminished state.

II. the "i-diminishing force" of the reading vacuum

In her book *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (2018), Maryanne Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist and developmental psychologist, argues that this is a "hinge moment" for our generation (p. 205); in our culture "that rewards immediacy, ease, and efficiency, the demanding time and effort involved in developing all the aspects of critical thought makes it an increasingly embattled entity" (p. 62).

¹² Thus, Tom Peters, in an article entitled *The Brand Called You*, suggests that "It's time for me—and you—to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work . . . our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You."

¹³ Note, too, that solitude was very much discouraged in *Brave New World* (p. 163).

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Wolf's main thesis is that the neural networks that underly and sustain our capacity to be thoughtful, critical analysts of knowledge ultimately receive their support from deep, reflective, and analytic reading. It is important to note that the reading to which Wolf is referring is not just any sort, as in reading words on a screen, or even reading for entertainment which, she notes, activate different parts of the brain (p. 52). Thus, for instance, there were significant differences in reading comprehension for children reading the same story in print versus the screen – even though most children prefer the latter (p. 117). The explanation seems to be that screens are processed unconsciously like film, thus making the many details and different stimuli on the screen appear impossible to remember (p. 119).

Wolf reminds us that the reading brain is not hard-wired the way language is (p. 17): that it is an unnatural cultural invention that has been in existence for scarcely six thousand years (p. 16). It developed as a result of the plasticity of our brains, which permits us to form ever more sophisticated and expanded circuits. This same plasticity, however, can also result in ever less sophisticated circuits, depending on environmental factors (p. 19). And there can be no doubt that technology is dramatically changing the environment. In agreement with the Turkle's findings, Wolf cites a study on the media habits of people in their twenties, which indicated that they switched media sources 27 times an hour and, on average, they checked their cell phones 150 to 190 times per day (p. 71). She also cites a study done at Stanford University that found a 40% drop in empathy levels over the last two decades, with the most precipitous decline in the last 10 years (p. 50). She worries that the perspective-taking dimension of deep reading is thus being threatened in our culture (p. 46); as we become a culture in which complex ideas are no longer the dominant currency (p. 76), we might quite literally lose more than we think (p. 76),¹⁴ with the implication being that, along with our sophisticated reading capacities, we will be losing the possibility of developed selves.

¹⁴ Here again, there are parallels with *Brave New World* in which young people were conditioned to develop an instinctive hatred of books (p. 22).

III. the “i-diminishing force” of robotic amelioration

Is it speciesism to object to robotic amelioration? (Turkle, p. 7) Turkle suggests, perhaps rhetorically, that, surely, a responsive robot, even one with scripted behaviour, is better than a demanding partner (p. 8). After all, I know that the robot will always be there for me, to say nothing of the fact that whenever I am done, I can just walk away (p. 10).

We are slipping into the world of robotic amelioration when we give toys like Tamagotchis to kids who learn to love them *because* they nurture them (Turkle, p. 31) and who experience a feeling of loss when they “die” (p. 32). And some elders say that they prefer robots to humans as their demands are less complicated (p. 104). And surely most of us would agree that if caretakers are not in abundance, robot companions are better than no companion at all (p. 109). And then there is Woebot, an artificial intelligence designed to assist those suffering from depression and anxiety. In a trial that started in 2020 with 4.7 million messages exchanged each week, 75% of users reported feeling better after using the tool for the first time.¹⁵

But what about the general social habits of young people? What about, for instance, the young man in Japan who married a hologram,¹⁶ or the fact that approximately a million people, called Hikikomori¹⁷, live in almost total isolation in Japan, except for the company of technology. In harmony with this trend, David Levy, in his book *Love and Sex with Robots* (2007), predicts that sex with robots will become the norm rather than an oddity (p. 183); that the myth of mutuality in sexual intercourse will dissipate (p. 204) and, that, in its place, there will be endless variety, with gorgeous partners who come to us unencumbered by expectations (pp. 208-211)

¹⁵ <https://woebothealth.com/>

¹⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/28/health/rise-of-digisexuals-intl/index.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/february/japan-hikikomori-isolation-society/#close>

<https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-topics/c05008/japan%E2%80%99s-hikikomori-population-could-top-10-million.html>

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– a happy side-effect being that the vulnerable will no longer be lured into the degrading “profession” of prostitution (Connell, 2004).

Turkle worries about the “self-impact” of the expansion of robot companion. She notes that being cared for by robots means robots “take care of us,” and not “care about us” (p. 106), and because we know that, she worries that we may lose the capacity to put ourselves in the place of others, something that is essentially human (p. 108). Of course, one might say that we humans are both masters of pretending and projecting feelings toward and onto other humans and so, in many ways, might be considered robotic ourselves. Still, the “other minds problem” aside¹⁸, it has generally been taken as a cultural improvement that we assume that others suffer when exposed to horrific conditions. One wonders how this might change when that capacity for empathy diminishes.

VI. the “i-diminishing force” of crowd communication

Aside from its impact on individual psyches, social media also transforms communication from one in which individuals primarily see themselves as engaging in one-on-one dialogue to one in which individuals primarily see themselves as communicating with crowds.

The social psychology text *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, first written in 1894 by Gustav Le Bon, is considered a pivotal work in the study of crowd communication and behavior. One of the basic tenets of Le Bon’s book is that “an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics, very different from those of the individuals composing them” (2020, p. 1); that “from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics” (p. iii).

There are a number of reasons why we should not find this surprising. For one, “the individual forming part of a crowd, solely from numerical considerations, forms

¹⁸ Since our minds are “essentially” private in the sense that we cannot *know* that anyone other than ourselves has a mind, but that, given certain behaviors, we *assume* that others have a mind (e.g., Wittgenstein’s private language argument), some might argue that treating a robot *as if* it had a mind is not essentially different from what we do when interacting with other humans.

a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint” (p. 6). For another, “A crowd being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely” (p. 6). As a result, Le Bon says that in a crowd, “a man descends several rungs on the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian – that is, a creature acting on instinct” (p. 7).

Thus, given that crowds of people seem to be “guided almost exclusively by unconscious motives,” (p. 11) and hence, as a group, develop the characteristics of “impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments,” (p. 10), it follows that communicating with a crowd must be vastly different from communicating with isolated individuals. To successfully communicate with crowds, one must be prepared, according to Le Bon, “to exaggerate, to affirm, to resort of repetition, and never attempt to prove anything by reasoning” (p. 23), and one must avoid nuance both in argument, since crowds “accept and reject ideas as a whole” (p. 38) and in sentiment, as “sympathy quickly becomes adoration; antipathy-hatred” (p. 38). Simplistic black-and-white messages that appeal to the mammalian brain are the essence of crowd communication.

Since the chief goal of such leaders as Hitler and Mussolini was crowd control, it is hardly surprising that they adopted many of the strategies suggested by Le Bon. And Edward Bernays, in his book *Propaganda* (2005), originally published in 1928, argues that it is important to note that “men do not need to be actually gathered together in a public meeting or in a street riot, to be subject to the influences of mass psychology. Because man is by nature gregarious, he feels himself to be a member of a herd, even when he is alone in his room with the curtains drawn. His mind retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by group influences” (Bernays, 2005, p. 73). All of which concurs with the communicative characteristics that Sherry Turkle (2012) found in her study of digital natives, which showed that communicating online through social media and text is far closer to constantly propagandizing (particularly

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about oneself) than actually communicating. She notes that, as a result, young people are developing fragile narcissistic personality structures that are in constant need of support (p. 177). Turkle argues that many digital natives suffer from what she refers to as “presentation anxiety” (p. 182) and much prefer to communicate via social media using le Bon’s menu (to exaggerate, to affirm, to resort of repetition, and never attempt to prove anything by reasoning, etc.) rather than engage even in telephone calls, in which the resulting conversation may jeopardize the self-advertising¹⁹.

But if the culture evolves so that most of us become propagandists and most of us are in the grip of “group think,” if the propensity to engage in genuine dialogue proportionately vanishes, then so too does the logical space for reasoning (Sellars, 1962).

the “i-diminishing force” of decreasing social capital.

This grim situation of being “Alone Together” looks even grimmer if we take into account the fact that inter-human connection, or what Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam refers to as “social capital,” appears to be decreasing at alarming rates. In his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam marshals a mind-numbing array of data that shows that on virtually every conceivable measure, from political participation to volunteering, religious affiliation, union membership, participation in organized sport (hence the title), even sharing dinner with friends, civic participation is plummeting to levels not seen for almost 100 years. And we should care, Putnam argues, because connectivity is, on the one hand, inversely related to crime, while, on the other, positively related with economic prosperity, physical health, overall sense of personal well-being and how well education works.

Utilizing various sophisticated statistical techniques, Putnam examines diverse factors that might be causing this decline in social capital, including increasing demands on people’s time as families manage two careers; lengthy commutes; the

¹⁹ She even quotes a young man who says that, one day, he might force himself to talk on the phone, since, later in life, he thinks he will need to learn how to have a conversation (p. 201), but not now.

tendency for technology and mass media to capture our attention; and intergenerational differences. He found that “the single most consistent predictor” for civic disengagement was television (pp. 230-1) – and this was when television was the tech-king. Putnam’s study was published before Facebook was created, and only shortly after the smartphone was invented. One shudders to think what such a study would show twenty years later when 77% of Americans own smartphones²⁰

should we stop mourning the dodo?

David Levy (2007), urges us, in effect, to stop mourning “the dodo.” Social media, technology, and robots are here to stay, warts and all. If a diminishing-I is both a condition and result of increasing human-techno compatibility, well, so be it. With regard to robots, Levy says that the time has come to accept them as our colleagues and companions. Robots, after all, are already highly competent at making medical diagnoses, prospecting for minerals, making recommendations in court cases for judges, playing chess, composing music, drawing, painting (p. 7), playing the trumpet, playing baseball and engaging in Sumo tournaments (p. 263). Soccer matches between teams of robots have become a major international technical sport since its inception in 1996 (p. 20), and Levy argues that since humans already form bonds with animals – which in many cases are more therapeutic than the bonds with other humans – they will clearly be able to bond with robots who will be even more responsive to their behavior (p. 60). Since robots can be programmed to seek out and comment favorably on your good points, to agree with our every preference, (p. 43-44) and never to fall out of love with us (p. 132), isn’t a bit “old hat” to worry about such quaint notions as authenticity? Isn’t this the perfect antidote to the difficulties many people face in forming satisfactory relationships with other humans (p. 115)?

Levy asks us to imagine a world in which robots are just like us (almost). A world in which the boundary between our perceptions of robots and our perceptions of our fellow humans has become so blurred that most of us treat robots as though they

²⁰ <https://techjury.net/blog/smartphone-usage-statistics/>

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are intellectual, social, and moral beings; we will recognize that their capacity for serving as our companions, our lovers, and our life partners will in many ways be superior to those of mere mortals (p. 303). Levy is convinced that this is what the world will look like by the year 2050 (p. 303) and that this is something to celebrate.

a case for saving selves

There is a plethora of authors to whom one could turn for mounting a case for the importance of saving selves. We will focus primarily on one here and that is the case made by Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1985). It seems appropriate that we tap into Frankl's thinking on this topic since he, along with millions of others, suffered greatly from the impact of the combined work of diminished selves under the spell of Nazi propaganda articulated in Le Bon's work cited earlier.

For Frankl, the question "What is the point of being alive?" is one that we cannot help but ask ourselves, and he describes the quest to answer this query as the "will to meaning" (p. 121). Frankl argues that each person "is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible" (p. 131). Those who do not hear the call to meaning and instead get caught up in the will to power, the will to money, or the will to pleasure (as in various addictions), end up suffering, according to Frankl, from what he refers to as an "existential vacuum" (p. 128), and will tend to end up either doing what other people do (conformism) or doing what other people wish him to do (totalitarianism) (p. 128). But they will be left with life's central question unanswered: what is the point of my being alive?

Since Frankl is a psychiatrist, his writings primarily focus on the wellbeing of individuals. However, the black cloud of the holocaust blows a dark and persistent warning from the past with regard to what he refers to as collective neurosis (p. 152).

In a 1966 radio lecture, which later become an article entitled "Education After Auschwitz," Theodor Adorno makes the claim that well-developed selves are critical

for the wellbeing of society at large. He argues that “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (p. 1). He says:

Every debate about the ideals of education is trivial and inconsequential compared to this single ideal: never again Auschwitz. It was the barbarism all education strives against. One speaks of the threat of a relapse into barbarism. But it is not a threat – Auschwitz was this relapse, and barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse continue largely unchanged. That is the whole horror. The societal pressure still bears down, although the danger remains invisible nowadays. It drives people toward the unspeakable, which culminated on a world-historical scale in Auschwitz. (p. 1)

With regard to preventing the reemergence of such social madness, Adorno argues that “Since the possibility of changing the objective – namely societal and political – conditions is extremely limited today, attempts to work against the repetition of Auschwitz are necessarily restricted to the subjective dimension.” (p. 2)

By this he does not mean such strategies as ramping up universal empathy through such popular programs as *The Roots of Empathy*²¹, nor would enlightenment about the positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities be of much use. He says that “The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection” (p. 2). This is so because “with the loss of their identity and power of resistance, people also forfeit those qualities by virtue of which they are able to pit themselves against what at some moment might lure them again to commit atrocity” (p. 2-3). The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, . . . the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating (p. 4). People who blindly slot themselves into the collective already make themselves into something like inert material, extinguishing themselves as self-determined beings. With this comes the willingness to treat others as an amorphous mass (p. 6).

In the quote above, Adorno says that Auschwitz symbolized the barbarism that “all education strives against” (p. 1). On the face of it, however, Adorno clearly should

²¹ <https://rootsofempathy.org/>

I consider it an illusion to think that the appeal to bonds—let alone the demand that everyone should again embrace social ties so that things will look up for the world and for people—would help in any serious way (Adorno, p. 3).

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have put “should” in the above sentence since history has demonstrated in spades that education isn’t the least bit concerned with building selves to face off the threat of barbarism. After all, education in Germany prior to the Holocaust was, on almost any other measure, superb. From the time that Nobel Prizes were established in 1901 until 1939 (the beginning of WWII), i.e., 38 years, Germany received 43 Nobel prizes. So, if education that results in Nobel Prizes is considered an ideal by most educators, the reemergence of Auschwitz – despite pleas from heroes like Frankl and Adorno – seems virtually inevitable.

education for the development of the self

Educators who believe with Adorno that the *premier* demand of education is to promote the sort of self-reflection that nurtures the development of selves have their work cut out.

What might that education look like?

First, youngsters need to take courses in “tech literacy,” not in the sense of learning how to program, but in the sense of understanding the invisible tech forces to which they are exposed and how their capacity of self-determination is being hijacked. Such documentaries as *The Social Dilemma*²² and *The Great Hack*²³ that explain how algorithms, created with every click, tweet and search, ensure we are presented with an endless source of familiar interests, political viewpoints, and products that are “tailored” to create echo-chamber of like-minded users would help in this regard. Young people need to be invited to reflect on the fact that “recommended” videos for Facebook users on political topics differ depending upon whether the user is a democrat or a republican, thus reinforcing ever wider social divides.²⁴

²² <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/81254224>

²³ <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/80117542>

²⁴ In the case of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Cambridge Analytica, a data-analyst company, used information gathered via Facebook to create content to sway public opinion. Disinformation campaigns have become a grave threat to democracy; for many people, it is almost impossible to know what is true. For those who frequent social media sites, our keystrokes and clicks become the

Second, youngsters need to understand the dynamics of self-development: its dynamic is a function of being able to take into account ever more reasoned dimensions, so that the result is “quantitative expansion and qualitative upgrading” (Gardner, 1998). They need to know that, while genuinely hearing and reflecting on the reasons given in support of an opposing view can be arduous in the extreme, it is, nonetheless, to their benefit as they will become more of who they are by reasoning with others who may think differently.

Third, such an education must focus on promoting (through constant practice) the capacity and the propensity to reasonably dialogue with those who think differently, and, in this regard, there is hope in the program referred to as Philosophy for/with Children (P4C) a program that is alive and well in over 64 countries over the world.²⁵

To those not familiar with the program, the very name “Philosophy for Children”²⁶ may ignite extreme skepticism, particularly in those who have spent endless hours trying to make sense of Kant’s transcendental deduction, or who sat through tedious lectures on what Heidegger might have meant by “dasein.” How can such philosophy enhance self-growth?

The answer is that such philosophy, i.e., the sort that requires one to ingest information about the viewpoints of various philosophers, in and of itself, cannot be expected to nourish self-growth. This is so because the focus of such philosophy is on *content*; its goal is information transfer. By contrast, the primary focus of the program referred to as Philosophy for Children is on *method*. Through this method, called the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI), or Engaged Philosophical Inquiry (EPI), participants are invited to come together as a community to try and listen to and reflect

very data that eventually metamorphose into personalized campaigns. Cambridge Analytica was also hired as a consultant company for the Brexit campaign.

²⁵ <https://www.icpic.org/>

²⁶ Varying names like “Philosophy for Children” or “Philosophy with Children” indicate differences in particulars, such as whether the original Lipman novels or children’s literature are used as stimuli for the communal inquiry. However, that there is a communal inquiry, referred to as a “Community of Philosophical Inquiry” (CPI), sometimes referred to as an EPI (Engaged Philosophical Inquiry), remains consistent.

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upon vastly different viewpoints under the demanding taskmaster of truth-seeking, and, in so doing, are required to consider multiple perspectives at one and the same time, thus priming the self-development engine of “quantitative expansion and qualitative upgrading” (Gardner, 1998).²⁷

It is important to emphasize, at this juncture, that the role of the facilitator in a CPI is crucial if this method is to be efficacious in nurturing the capacity of participants to reflect on the merits of opposing points of view. In contrast to casual conversation or opinion-gathering in which individuals remain married to their own points of view and listen primarily to refute—what might be referred to as “synchronous cognitive monogamy,” a facilitator can encourage participants to hear the reasoning that supports conflicting viewpoints and reflect on whether, and if so how, to integrate those viewpoints if no fault is found with the supporting justification. Thus, when participants disagree, instead of each simply restating their position, they are invited to restate and reflect on the merits of others. “So, Johnny, you appear to disagree with Sally. Can you tell us in what way you think Sally’s reasoning is faulty?” It is in this way that the facilitator, instead of merely soliciting viewpoints, can start comparing, contrasting, and merging them together so that, on the one hand, as a community, there is forward movement toward a more adequate or “truthier” understanding “like a sailboat tacking into the wind” (Lipman, 1991, pp. 15-16), while, on the other, there is individual forward movement toward self-growth as a function of increased perspective-taking. It is thus in this sense that this pedagogical strategy has within it the possibility of reversing the present downward dialectic spiral of superficial, unreflective communication prodding ever-diminishing selves, which prods ever more superficial echoing, and so on.

Lastly, in fourth place, such an education requires that youngsters need not only practice in, but also an understanding of why, in-depth reading is critical for their ability for general reflection, self-reflection, and the capacity to understand the minds of others (Wolf, 2018).

²⁷ See footnote 1.

conclusion

Human beings, because they are self-conscious language-users, have the capacity, unlike their animal cousins, to make choices on the basis of reason, and so claim those choices as their own. It is through these autonomous choices that humans can create who it is that they strive to be (Gardner, 2009, pp. 10-20). Is this a capacity that people naturally cherish?

Dostoyevsky does not think so. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky has the Grand Inquisitor criticize Christ for overestimating what we might call “the will to self.” He says:

I swear the people are weaker and baser by nature than Thou hast believed them to be . . . By showing them so much respect, Thou didst, as it were, cease to feel for them, for Thou didst ask far too much from them . . . Respecting them less, Thou wouldst have asked less of them. (Dostoyevsky, 2001, p. 173)

According to the Inquisitor, what humans want, above all else, is just to be happy – to be “somatized” in Huxley’s words; and the risky business of taking personal responsibility for one’s decision is the antithesis of that state. Thus, according to the Inquisitor, nothing is a greater cause of suffering than freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil (Dostoyevsky, 2001, p. 172). As a result, people crave to blend into a community and will happily slay those who stray from the community’s orthodoxy, since in-group disagreement unsettles their sense of infallibility (Dostoyevsky, 2001, p. 172).

The Brothers Karamazov was written in 1879, over 140 years ago. Dostoyevsky’s critique at that time was focused on how religion diminishes selves. Here we focus on a new religion, i.e., technology, but we are suggesting that the impact is the same. So, the Inquisitor’s questions haunt us still. Are we wrong in assuming that the capacity for autonomous choice is the highest human good, and therefore it ought to be nourished by education? Should we care more for human happiness and respect humanity’s capacity for “self-making” less? Should we support people’s virtual

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relationships with substitute-humans as it saves them from discord, uncertainty, and potential loneliness?

Since the goal of this paper has been to create a good deal of concern, worry and discomfort, it may be evident that we are on the side of Dostoyevsky's Christ. We do indeed believe that the capacity for self-creation is the highest human good, and therefore it ought to be nourished by education.

However, if education is to embrace this challenge, educators must do so head on, and not only promote the kind of self-reflection that nurtures self-making but throw down the gauntlet and explicitly explain that this kind of education is *not* about getting ever higher grades, nor about being exceptional contributors to the national economy, nor about becoming members of professions about which they can be proud, nor even about winning Nobel Prizes. Educators must themselves be selves and embrace the risk of professing their own personal belief that "self-making" is the highest human good, and thereafter help their charges embrace the necessary conditions for self-creation which, importantly, requires constant emergence in facilitated dialogue across difference in Communities of Philosophical Inquiry.

And, with this final message, along with Dostoyevsky's Christ, we send you a silent sad smile and a kiss.

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