

**The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit**  
**Twentieth Anniversary Edition**

By Sherry Turkle

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Before the Industrial Revolution, European workers celebrated Saint Monday, a weekly holiday from work that celebrated the leisurely start of the work week.<sup>1</sup> As new technologies were introduced into the workforce, the landscape of the labor force changed—employers forced their employees to work on Mondays, eradicating Saint Monday, and the work week became more structured and much longer. Daily attendance at work was required. Authors and historians discuss at length the harmful impact of this period of intense mechanization and often portray technology as something alien and dangerous that invades man’s natural world. Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, for example, call attention to the serious dangers that Industrial Revolution technologies posed for human health.

Today’s “Virtual” Revolution has borrowed its nomenclature from the Industrial Revolution, but do the two compare? Like the machines of the Industrial Revolution, computer technologies have radically changed the way we work, and popular depictions of computers’ impact on the labor force often embody pejorative themes. However, a computer, unlike a textile mill, does not necessarily forebode a debilitating injury. The Virtual Revolution’s main threat to our work is that the computer makes our work unbearably banal. One calls to mind the image of the anonymous worker hunching over

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas A. Reid, “The Decline of Saint Monday 1766-1876,” *Past and Present*, 71: 76-101 (1976).

his desktop computer in his cubicle day after day, using the computer as a tool to do the most mundane of word processing tasks; or consider the parody motion picture, *Office Space*, where a the disgruntled co-worker fantasizes about having a physical altercation with a temperamental fax machine.<sup>2</sup>

The title of Sherry Turkle's book, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, then, is a surprisingly ethereal one. The author of *Psychoanalytic Politics* (Basic Books, 1978) claims that computers are anything but a mundane, but necessary workplace tool. Turkle asserts that computers are not just tools that make our lives and work more efficient (banal), but are worldly subjects intimately linked to our social and psychological lives. Computers change not only what we do, but how we think about the world and ourselves. Turkle, trained as a humanist, is a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She does not engage in a dichotomous "man versus machine" type analysis of computers, and instead emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and computers. Published originally in 1984, the second edition of this book includes more exposition on personal computers and PDAs, reflecting the recent high sales and widespread usage of such machines at work, at school, and in the home.<sup>3</sup>

Through personal narratives, Turkle tracks the past twenty years of personal relationship with computers. Turkle's most interesting subjects are children who offer comments and observations about different computerized objects. She plays with the idea that children have regarded computers as possessing some human characteristics. In

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<sup>2</sup> See the motion picture, *Office Space*.

<sup>3</sup> The BBC news reports that by 2002, one billion personal computers were sold and that by 2008, two billion personal computers would be sold. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/sci/tech/2077986.stm>>.

fact, certain children playing computer games accuse the computer of cheating and of having a “mind.” However personified the computer may be for a child, however, even the least developed children do not necessarily regard the computer as alive in the same way as a human being. For the beginning stages of child development, the child’s explanation for the non-being of the computer reflects the simple Aristotelian idea that moving objects are alive, while non-moving ones are not. At the next level of development, the child does not recognize the computer as alive because it does not have a non-human maker and does not produce offspring. The child, at most developmental levels, distinguishes humans and computers generally because the computer is incapable of what is essentially human: tasting food, loving each other, going to church. Humans have affect; computers do not.

Adult and adolescents who work closely with computers are also quick to compare themselves to computers. But unlike the child who says that the computer is like a person, the adult person says that she is like a computer. Turkle interviews an MIT student, for instance, who describes his own brain as a computer. His comparison is more ontological than metaphorical. He even claims that humans do not have free will and that “decisions” are literally computed by the computer-brain. Another interviewee, instead of speaking about his psychological pain in terms of psychology, uses metaphors drawn from programming, cybernetics, and information processing.

The answer to the question of whether we are more similar or dissimilar to computers is not as interesting as the point of reference. The essential insight of Turkle’s book is that we compare ourselves to computers at all. Turkle correctly points out that humans have readily compared themselves with animals. Aristotle’s definition of man,

rational animal, has survived thousands of years of philosophical thought—until now? Turkle wonders if we now define man as a feeling computer or an emotional machine. This definition involves a paradox—between a mechanistic view of a machine and a mystical view of the emotional—a tension which Turkle surmises is deeply felt by contemporary culture.

One disappointing aspect of the new edition is that Turkle does not discuss in much detail the role of the Internet in our lives. Turkle briefly mentions that when we become a part of online life, we take on multiple identities, “cutting across ‘real life’ distinctions of gender, race, class, and culture.”<sup>4</sup> Further, she describes how thinking about online life as an ‘addiction’ is not particularly helpful because our relationships with our computers are not necessarily reducible to a relationship of inanimate thing versus “I.” Computer hackers, for example, often aestheticize and even romanticize their relationships with their computers. Despite the fact that adults and children spend many hours online interacting with technology and other people, Turkle does not examine the psychological connection to the Internet. Perhaps this is because the technology in this area is very new in its widespread accessibility or perhaps the subject is better left to an entire other work by Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*.

Turkle’s book is facially a psychology book about child development and how that landscape has changed because of the “virtual” environment children are now growing up in it. However, Turkle’s book is really more than a child development psychology book or a simple collection of narratives. As other reviewers have commented, this book is important for those who want to know where contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Turkle, p 288.

society is heading. The importance of Turkle's book specifically for the legal field is not obvious. One doubts that the Virtual Revolution will bring with it the Industrial Revolution's massive legislation protecting workers from workplace injuries and abuses. The legal effects of the Virtual Revolution may be harder to pin down, but Turkle has given us a start. We can imagine reconceptualizing one's reasonable expectation of privacy in relation to one's computer because of Turkle's findings about our intimacy with computers, for example. Turkle's theories may also have significance in defining computer crimes and in reexamining current approaches to prosecuting hackers. And more generally, Turkle's new definition of the person as "emotional machine" may influence the way the court regards both human reason and affect.

After reading Turkle, we can no longer look at computer technology as merely a tool for work. We must instead consider the intimate connection between the human subject and the computer.