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Technology as Cause of and Solution to the Empathy Problem

For decades, Sherry Turkle has explored the risks and opportunities of technology for people, relationships, and society. In *The Second Self* (1984), Turkle emphasised the positive potential of digital technologies and computer games. But since then, her work has increasingly documented the risks of technology as they have crystallised into tangible harms. Culminating in her recent memoir, *The Empathy Diaries* (2021), Turkle's oeuvre is best viewed as a warning that our increasing use of ICTs, and reliance on smartphones in particular, is causing us to become less empathetic. Here, we acknowledge Turkle's warning and use her own earlier technological optimism to investigate potential technological solutions to the emerging empathy problem.

In "The Assault on Empathy" (2018), Turkle blames the 40% decrease in empathy observed recently in college students on their excessive use of phones. Turkle argues that without understanding ourselves, we cannot have empathy. But where moments of solitude used to provide opportunities to reflect on ourselves, many young people now compulsively reach for their phones when they are alone. As such, they never develop an understanding of themselves. Young people who have never reflected on themselves fail catastrophically at understanding the complex emotional life of the people they converse with, and so have less empathy for them. Worse, Turkle claims, young people now reach for their phones at the first occurrence of a

lull in the conversation. Turkle sees value in the shared experience of awkwardness and vulnerability, as a chance to develop empathy for each other. When people retreat from conversations at the first sign of difficulty, they won't raise deeper more personal issues, won't get the opportunity to develop or exercise empathy, and won't give or receive the kind of support that helps them get through tough times. After a while, she claims, being empathetic becomes less and less natural, and so if a deep personal issue is raised, others might not know how to respond. In this way, Turkle argues, phones are empathically debilitating social crutches.

Turkle is right about the problem. People do hide from themselves and others in their phones. But phones are mere tools. Just as Turkle saw the potential benefits of early home computers for developing children's skills, we see the possibility of phones and similar technologies enhancing rather than hindering people's development and conversational skills.

In "The Tethered Self" (2011), Turkle argues that text-based communication is impersonal and impoverished. It need not be. For some, text-based communication is empowering. Many groups are disadvantaged by physical, or voice-based communication. Those with speech impediments or cognitive disorders that slow down language processing, those on the autism spectrum, or who do not conform to norms of physical appearance, are disadvantaged by the norms of face-to-face communication. For many in these groups, this technology enables rather than hinders friendships, deeper conversations, and the development of empathy. More generally, text-based interactions reduce the importance of physical cues which serve to exclude some from social interaction. Text as an initial connector of people provides the opportunity for reflecting on shared and different characteristics, and learning more about ourselves and others in a way that can promote empathy.

While the screen-free social times and events that Turkle calls for in most of her recent work are likely to benefit many people, the groups above may be disadvantaged or even miss out on opportunities to develop empathy in themselves or others. Therefore, the use

of screen-free times or events needs to be carefully and empathetically considered, and proactively positive uses of technology should not be ruled out just because phones or screens are involved.