

Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age
Maggie Jackson, Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2009. 266 pp.

The subtitle of this book is immensely appealing to us teachers of the Moral Coherency workshop, or at least to me. We see all sorts of things around us which we find aversive. Then, upon contemplation or further reading, we recognize that they are not just obnoxious, they are signs of our times. The problem is bigger and deeper and more built-in than we realized!

Jackson is deeply critical of aspects of late modern society, and she has a wonderful way with words to make her critique very sharply pointed. Here are two passages which summarize the point of the book:

“As our attentional skills are squandered, we are plunging into a culture of mistrust, skimming, and a dehumanizing merging between man and machine. As we cultivate lives of distraction, we are losing our capacity to create and preserve wisdom and slipping toward a time of ignorance that is paradoxically born amid an abundance of information and connectivity.” (16)

“Relying on multitasking as a way of life, we chop up our opportunities and our abilities to make big-picture sense of the world and pursue our long-term goals. In the name of efficiency, we are diluting some of the essential qualities that make us human.” (81)

Examples of the mess we have gotten ourselves into:

“With a mixture of self-mockery, perverse pride in our busyness, and real uneasiness, we accept that ADD has spilled far past the confines of the medical world.” (16)

“Nearly a third of fourteen to twenty-one year-olds juggle five to eight media while doing homework. Yet for all their tech fluency, kids show less patience, skepticism, tenacity, and skill than adults in navigating the Web, all the while overestimating their own prowess, studies show.” (18)

“Video games can boost your ability to pay attention to multiple stimuli in your field of vision, a skill useful for driving but not for analytical thinking.” (19)

“The tools we are wholeheartedly embracing today are inherently powerful, and we ignore that truth at our peril. You can use a stick for digging potatoes or stabbing your neighbor, so how you use a stick is important; but equally important is the fact that a stick is not a wheel. It is crucial that we better understand how our new high-tech tools, from video games to PowerPoint, may be affecting us.” (21)

“In the years leading into a dark age, societies often exhibit an inability to perceive or act upon a looming threat, such as a declining resource. Twilight cultures begin to show a preference for veneer and form, not depth and content; a stubborn blindness to consequences of actions, from the leadership on down. In other words, an epidemic erosion of attention is a sure sign of an impending dark age.” (26)

On using the Internet: “Inundated by perspectives, by lateral vistas of information that stretch endlessly in every direction, we no longer accept the possibility of assembling a complete picture,” asserts literary critic Sven Birkerts. “We are experiencing in our time a loss of depth—a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth.” (42)

“Whether you call it being multifaceted or being fragmented, at its heart networked individualism is about diffusion. Connectivity is up, cohesion is down.” (59)

“Seventeen percent of the families in the UCLA study consistently ate dinner together. On weekdays, the parents and at least one child came together in a room just sixteen percent of their time at home.” (63)

Kate Zernicke writes that “A minivan with a DVD player is just a mobile way for parents to edit out their own children.” (65)

“Push and pull, back and forth, television is in essence an interruption machine, the most powerful attention slicer yet invented. Just step into the room with the enticing glow, and life changes.” (72)

“...the attentional turf wars erupting in meeting rooms, conference symposia, and college classes.” (74)

“After realizing that unconsciously he had subdivided his day into smaller and smaller units of ‘efficient time use,’ physicist Alan Lightman realized that he was losing his capacity to dream, imagine, question, explore, and, in effect, nurture an inner self. He was, in a sense, becoming a ‘prisoner of the world.’ (79) (compare to the Personalists’ discussion of self-possession.)

“To raise children for a world of split focus is to raise generations who will have ceded cognitive control of their days.” (92)

“Now we dance on the surface of a thousand texts, skimming over billions of words in books and magazines, myriad flashing ads, and across the mesmerizing Web. The text is less the sacred keeper of the flame of knowledge, fraught with meaning and deeply embedded in our psyches, than the transparent carryall of burgeoning info-bits. It has become almost an oddity to re-read.” (161)

“Yet in honing the art of skimming across infinite texts, are we losing the hard-fought skill of delving beneath the surface?” (173)

Search engines such as Google run on algorithmic formulas that place irrelevant or mediocre sites on a par with expert ones. What’s highly linked, or paid for, gets top billing, regardless of merit. Yet what comes up first seems fine to most of us: nearly 75 percent of Americans with more than five years of on-line experience say search engines are fair and unbiased. Sixty percent don’t know that there are paid and unpaid results.” (163-4)

“In an age of virtual, mobile, split-focus distraction, the book is a link both to body and spirit. To read a book is a grounding and an ascension all at one moment, a feat no computer can yet carry off.” (182)

Jackson discusses the contributions of Jeremy Bentham, our friend from the History of Human Services workshop (mentioned also in Moral Coherency workshop), in the topic of surveillance. (127-30 and 150-1) There were by 2009 over seven million surveillance cameras installed in public places in the UK; and many affluent American homes have installed surveillance of parents on their children. “A panoptic culture teaches our children that we cannot take a chance on others. Unintentionally, it also teaches children that they are to be distrusted, and that we cannot take a chance on them.” (148) “We’re substituting instamatic fragments for the homegrown mutual knowledge that slowly builds into the soulful gamble called trust. We’ve mistaken the monologue of surveillance for the dialogue that is care.” (149)

Jackson has sections on our society’s exaltation of mobility:

“When I asked Regina Lewis if it’s hard to become rooted in Canton, a burgeoning suburb rimmed with industrial parks, she looked at me quizzically. ‘I don’t have any interest in becoming rooted here, honestly,’ she said slowly. ‘My safety net is made up of individuals. So while I need to have associations with time and space, I can be anywhere.’” (99)

And sections on the impending demise of meals, pause, rhetoric and oratory, storytelling, and the book. She recounts the experiments of Dan Simons in 1999, in which subjects were told to watch a one-minute film and to count the number of times a basketball was passed from one of six players to another. During the film, a person dressed in a gorilla suit walks slowly in front of the camera, stops, waves, and walks off. More than half of the subjects failed entirely to see the gorilla, and many refused to believe the experimenter's assurance that there was a gorilla, insisting on re-viewing the film. (137-8)

Now, that experiment, and so many people's insistence of their ability to multi-task without detriment, are alarming. The most alarming parts of Jackson's book, to me, brought back issues raised by CH's short presentation on "trans-humanism," and by MT's article shared with our Massachusetts group on "the Singularity." Jackson includes a chapter on robots and human-machine interaction, many passages of which I found deeply disturbing.

First, a summary of this point:

"Our growing relationship with the machine, with the 'spirit' of the machine, and with our own machine-stamped spirit, ultimately risks narrowing our connection to ourselves and to each other. This is the third collective loss, after trust and depth of thinking, that we face in a time of distraction. When we embrace the machine not as a tool but as part of us and as one of us, we begin to lose the inner will and outer means to connect with one another. We risk living in solitary glass cages, surrounded by shadows on the wall." (186)

And now some of what I found so disturbing, and sometimes revolting:

"Lean on me, confide in me, carry on the intricate social dance that you do with fellow humans,' these scientists effectively want the computer to invite. And all evidence shows that we humans will eagerly accept their offer." (187)

"The robotic Teddy bear Huggable, built as a companion for children and the elderly (!), has two thousand sensors under its fur-covered silicon skin that can measure temperature, force, and electrical fields. Embrace it, it hugs back.... All the while the robotic bear relays audio, video, and other information wirelessly to a nurse, tutor, babysitter, or parent.... The robot is a form of 'local intelligence,' which can 'reduce the cognitive load of the operator,' explains Breazeal." (187)

“Noting that children have been shown to learn more when they do schoolwork together with friends than with non-friends, Picard and Breazeal suggest that robots like Huggables would make a good study-mate.” (188)

An early form of such robots, really just a programmed voice, developed at MIT in the 1960's by Joseph Weizenbaum, was called Eliza. “Eliza's attraction to people surprised and disturbed its inventor. Some of his students, who knew exactly how Eliza worked, asked to be alone with the machine.” (190)

Laura is a more recent robotic voice, programmed to encourage exercise in its elderly subjects. “One subject remarked, ‘I feel Laura, in her own unique way, is really concerned about my welfare.’ Another said without irony, ‘Laura and I trust each other.’ More than one reported that Laura ‘liked’ them.” (191)

“The essential argument in favor of affective computing is that such robots or software agents can offer an encouraging word, a comforting gesture, or a bit of advice as well or even better than humans.” (194)

“Feeling sorry for the tortoises and completely unmoved by the wonder of their presence, Turkel's daughter remarked that the museum could just as well have used robots. Other children in line agreed, to their parents' dismay. Turkel found that, for most children, ‘aliveness doesn't seem worth the trouble, and seems to have no intrinsic value.’” (195)

“At one of several Massachusetts nursing homes where Turkel is studying the use of sophisticated robotic seals as pets, a lonely seventy-two-year-old woman, saddened by her son's refusal to visit her, stroked the robot. ‘You're sad, aren't you,’ murmured Ruth. ‘It's tough out there, yes, it's hard.’” (195)

Jackson sums up this section “Trust, depth of thought, and finally a spirit of humanity begin to be lost. Such changes are the harbingers of a wildly inventive, marvelously technological dark age.” (206)

“In an era when we show signs of becoming content with thinner relationships, it may become easier for us to care morally for the machines that we in turn program to care for our most vulnerable members of society. And what a distraction that would be from our responsibility to one another.” (207)

The last third of Jackson's book is entitled "Dark Times... Or the Renaissance of Attention?" I quite often read books about the demise of our civilization (it's bigger and deeper and more built-in than I realized!) in which I find their last chapters the weakest. They often seem to say we are on the cusp of a turning point, about to turn it around. Jackson's book struck me this way, as well.

Jackson's last chapters boil down to the necessity of self-discipline, and of how all of us need to help each other with such self-discipline. That is surely true. But what I found distracting (and, I am afraid, misleading) in her closing chapters, however, was her fascination with the neurological mechanisms of attention. Everything she said about the **brain**, added nothing at all to our understanding (and her insights) about the **mind**. Ironically, she devotes several pages to glowing reports about traditional Buddhist methods of focusing the mind, interspersed with explication of how brain scanners can discern the neurology of these methods. Jackson (I am grateful) does not propose drugs or surgery to improve such neurological workings, only Buddhist (and other methods of) self-discipline. So why talk about the neurology at all?

The last sections of the book, hope for a renaissance of attention, also fail to propose any systemic changes in how our society works, only the individual response, methods of self-discipline. As WW taught in the planning workshop long ago, it is tempting to seek only clinical solutions to systemic problems.

All in all, however, this is an excellent book. Some of Jackson's insights and examples might be added (but then, what would be subtracted, asks ST) to our workshop, and at least a couple of her beautifully-composed thoughts will be added to my list of Moral Coherency quotations.