

Comments on Matthew B. Crawford's *The World Beyond Your Head*



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ABSTRACT

Matthew Crawford invites readers to consider how their contact with the real world has been imperiled by the notion that all experience is mediated by mental representations and how skilled activities providing bodily contact with the environment help recover us from this mistaken perspective. In this brief presentation, I ask whether in his critique of mediated experience by appeal to physical skills Crawford neglects to appreciate Polanyi's emphasis on intellectual probes as instruments for contacting reality and whether his doing so inappropriately—and perhaps inadvertently—diminishes the all-important place of belief in Polanyi's epistemology.

Matthew Crawford's *The World Beyond Your Head* (hereafter *WBYH*) concerns itself with the organizing of our lives in modern society and brings, in my view, much needed perspective to the topic. It urges us by appeal to skilled contact with the real world to relinquish technologies that increasingly distance us from this space and to wake up to the fact that reality is not ours for the making, but is encountered in terms of what J.J. Gibson calls affordances. Quoting Gibson, Crawford says, "The affordances of the environment are 'what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, for good or ill'" (55), and he holds that they are readily encountered in such places as the carpenter's shop and mechanic's garage.¹

In the Preface, Crawford sums up his position this way: “Skilled practices serve as an anchor to the world beyond one’s head—a point of triangulation with objects and other people who have a reality of their own” (x). From this vantage point, he explores implications for how we structure the spaces we live in, relate to each other, and rely on tradition to move forward. At the end of the book, I found myself wishing even more for a shared vision of things in society that resembles how organ-makers Taylor and Boody do their craft: “They intend,” Crawford says, “for their organs still to be in use four hundred years from now, and this orientation toward the future requires... engagement with...the past” (210). I think *WBYH* goes some distance in helping this wish become an actuality and appreciate it for this reason.

What I have to offer in my comments on Crawford’s book I wish to acknowledge frankly are not those of a veteran reader of social and political philosophy or even, unfortunately, of Michael Polanyi. I am educating myself in these matters, and have been indelibly touched by Polanyi, but the education is not complete and likely will not be for some years. A final disclaimer is that, although I am a psychologist, the thoughts I present do not draw upon my knowledge of research in this area or engage with the work Crawford discusses in making a case for, for instance, embodied perception and self-regulation; he seems to handle these subjects very well on his own. Rather, my observations lie elsewhere and revolve really only around one theme. It dawned on me early in my reading and resurfaced time and again, so I trusted that I had landed on something important—to me, personally, if nothing else.

The theme is best captured in the negative by Crawford’s critique of mental representations and mediated experience, the Kantian notion that the will is free from governance by the material universe and can give laws unto itself, and David Foster Wallace’s belief that meaning in the world is constructed rather than pressed upon us from the outside. In the positive direction, the theme comes through, not surprisingly, in the title of the book and in references to, for instance, “the world as it is” (253), to its having “a reality of its own” (28, 173) and being “independent of the self” (28, 73, 94) and open to direct confrontation (77). As remarked above, Crawford believes such confrontations especially transpire in skilled activities like hockey, glass-blowing, and motorcycle riding where things outside of us behave in ways that do not readily yield, if they ever do, to our wishes. Such skills are learned by submitting to authorities who are masters of their realm and live with their instruments and tools as extensions of their being, expertly engaging the world beyond their heads as seasoned short-order cooks do during lunch rushes.

These examples bring of course to mind Michael Polanyi’s picture of a blind man’s reliance on a stick to navigate his surroundings. Although at first feeling foreign to users, with extended use and experience, probes become “parts of our own existence,” (*PK*, 59). Crawford’s emphasis, then, is on concrete activities that bring us into contact

with an independently existing reality which acts back upon us in a way that constrains our ability to represent it in whatever way we wish. He says very late in his book, “As embodied beings who use tools and prosthetics, the world shows up for us through its affordances; it is a world that we act in, not merely observe” (249). Because our skills are attuned to the affordances of the world, how we come to see it is not arbitrary; our vision has been shaped by reality itself. No representations are needed because a *direct, unmediated* confrontation has occurred in the skilled activity. The world has shown up for us, and by submitting to it, we interweave ourselves with it.

As I noted already, I am genuinely sympathetic to Crawford’s hope for how things might be in a society revised in the ways he recommends, yet I nevertheless find myself discomfited with what appears to be the crux of his position—namely, that experiences of the finger-turning-bolt kind comprise a realm of activities that are generally free from representation or mediation. The reason for this is that I cannot conceive of ever not having to *think about* or *make sense* of these behaviors, and this sense does not seem to be given in the actions themselves. Indeed, as best I can discern, the Crawford-inspired claim that experiences of the finger-turning-bolt kind are free of representations is *itself* a representation. It is a call to see the world in one way rather than another, and the very fact that Crawford believes I stand in need to hear the call shows, I think, that his understanding is not one the world inevitably urges upon me in skilled activity or otherwise. And to back up a step, is it not important to wonder how Kant ever succeeded through his philosophy of dissociating us from the world as it is if reconceiving its most essential features is not open to us?

I do see signs in the book of Crawford’s appreciation for the representational nature of his project and of the skilled activities we learn in apprenticeships. He shows it, for instance, in the sentence immediately following the one I quoted above: “[W]hen we acquire new skills,” he says, “we come to see the world differently” (249). But what leaves me confused is how much of this representation Crawford sees us bringing to the table and how much of it he believes grows from direct confrontations with the world as it is. Much more in the book I get the sense that the latter plays the greater role. As an example, the quotation by Arthur Glenberg speaks loudly:

[E]mbodied representations do not need to be mapped onto the world to become meaningful because they arise from the world. [They are] directly grounded by virtue of being lawfully and analogically related to properties of the world and how these properties are transduced by perceptual systems (83).

I take this as a call to see embodied representations as the key to apprehending the world *factually*—in a fashion that is irrevocably true to our nature and the nature of things beyond us. Said differently, I see this as a call to the possibility of certain

knowledge and a confidence akin to that espoused by positivistic science, and I am of the mind that while it is indubitable that Polanyi sees the world's reality and our own as genuine, he is resistant to any move that would make our understanding of either stand independent of what we make of them. This, in fact, is where faith enters so vitally into the picture for us.

I will have more to say about this, but first let me see if I can make the grounds for my objection clearer. Polanyi notes in his discussion of skills that the “[h]ammers and probes” that are of primary interest to Crawford “can be replaced by intellectual tools” (*PK*, 59). I take him to be referring here to representations. He continues: “[T]hink of any interpretative framework and particularly of the formalism of the exact sciences. I am not speaking of the specific assertions which fill the textbooks, but of the suppositions which underlie the method by which these assertions are arrived at” (*PK*, 59). These suppositions, I think it is fair to say, are mediators of experience; they stand behind our use of hammers and probes and make sense of them for us. We indwell them and come in contact with reality through them just as we do with the tools and implements of a skilled activity, but the latter are less encompassing. As Polanyi observes,

We assimilate most...pre-suppositions by learning to speak of things in a certain language, in which there are names for various kinds of objects, names by which objects can be classified, making such distinctions as between past and present, living and dead, healthy and sick, and thousands of others...They are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves... (*PK*, 59-60).

And elsewhere he says,

Our native gift of speech enables us to enter on the mental life of man by assimilating our cultural heritage. We come into existence mentally, by adding to our bodily equipment an articulate framework and using it for understanding experience. Human thought grows only within language and since language can exist only in a society, all thought is rooted in society (*SM*, 60).

I am not the greatest fan of referencing contemporary cultural products in academic forums, but in this case the parallel seems too apposite to ignore. I have in mind a particular film. It is 2015's *Mad Max*, which is a resurrection of the older movies by the same name. The story, as I am sure some of you are aware, concerns a fractured and tribally organized humanity in a post-apocalyptic wasteland fighting one another for possession of water, weaponized automobiles, and gasoline. A kind of religious fervor

permeates these characters' lives. It is an eerie picture of a world of representations we do not have, and however fictional it may be, my purpose in drawing attention to it is to say that I really do not think we should assume that the activities of turning an oil pan bolt, replacing a cracked fuel line, or gripping a steering wheel reflect the same reality to us as they would to those characters if they were real. Instead, I am inclined to think that a car for them is almost sentient, a chariot to an afterlife, a protector and destroyer, a living symbol as much as a machine. I am not denying here that the motions of tightening a drain plug might look the same to a third-party observer of our world and theirs; I am, however, asserting that the meaning of the activity reflected in how it is spoken of and represented in the two communities would be vastly different and that the difference would not be inconsequential—merely a product of reality setting parameters on our thoughts without dictating their precise form—but bound up with the very substance of what is taking place.

However “fit to reality” the actions of a soldier in cleaning his gun are, a chef to the aromas of a stew he is preparing, or an early Apache to the heave of his horse running at full speed, I am at pains to see how the pictures they have of their activities could ever emerge purely from the activities themselves, as Glenberg appears to suggest and Crawford to support. Are they “grounded”? Yes, I suppose they are, but this to me seems only to affirm the realness of the actor and of the world in which he lives; beyond this, there is quite truly a universe of possibilities for understanding what is taking place. When we submit to authorities to learn skills, we are coming not just to contact reality, but to represent it to ourselves. Is the reality revealed in the skills really *out there*? For Polanyi, the answer to this question is a nuanced yes that always emphasizes the ineradicable contribution made across generations by convivial inquirers to our understanding of what is real—an understanding that comes to us by inculcation into a tradition of speaking about and seeing the world. The out there-ness of reality in any absolute sense is taken away by this perspective and it urges us to recognize, as Polanyi does in his discussion of the fiduciary program, that “[s]een in the round, man stands at the beginning and at the end, as begetter and child of his own thought” (*PK*, 265). Because of this, we are left to wonder with Polanyi, “Is [man] speaking to himself in a language he alone can understand” (*PK*, 265)?

What rescues those of us who feel the disquiet this question engenders is the very piece of the equation I see Crawford's book as lacking and as the most precious gift that Polanyi makes possible: the ability to shamelessly say, “I believe.” For those who have eaten of the second apple, the world no longer looks the same, and the prospect of our resting sure that in this or that activity the world has shown up for us in a way that it alone is speaking and we are receiving directly its unadulterated communications is no more. As Polanyi says, even “our knowledge of Good and Evil” has “forever [been] imperiled” (*PK*, 268) by this new crisis, and from it skilled activity is no rescue by itself.

What is needed is a superior way of *representing* the world and it is reached I believe by indwelling the probe Polanyi has provided. It is one he builds up over the full course of *PK*, and although he goes to glorious lengths to make a case for his apprehension of the world, we see the lengths to which he goes as glorious and as satisfying only to the extent that we join him. That is to say, I do not see Polanyi appealing to the world beyond his head for ultimate proof of his claims. Rather, I see him appealing to *himself* as a living embodiment of a cultural heritage that transcends him and as a responsible explorer who seeks with others to peer into those parts of reality now hidden to us. “Logically,” he says, “the whole of my argument is but an elaboration of this circle: it is a systematic course in teaching myself to hold my own beliefs” (*PK*, 299).

Is this knowing arbitrary? Not in the least. It is the world viewed from the only place it can be: from inside of a commitment. It is this vision of things I am giving myself to, and I believe it to be true. It shows reality to me and promises to show more than I can presently conceive. Only via the probe of personal knowledge, held in faith, do I come to know the world beyond my head. I intuit that Crawford agrees, but judging from his infrequent use of such words as faith and belief with respect to how we contact reality, I take that his agreement remains tacit, or else I have mistakenly taken these forces to the bone when they do not cut that deep. Still I find myself compelled to believe that they do.

ENDNOTE

¹Page numbers in parentheses are to Crawford’s book.

REFERENCES

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