



BOOK REVIEW

Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Pp. 305. ISBN: 978-0-374-29298-0. \$26.00 hb, \$15.00 pb.

Matthew Crawford has followed his fine first book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, with an even stronger, more provocative second book, *The World Outside Your Head*. In his more recent, more comprehensive book, Crawford investigates several types of social dysfunction characteristic of our society. These include confusion about what is of value, fragmentation of attention, being lost in representations of reality instead of attending to what is actually real, the leveling of judgment to the lowest common denominator, weariness at the unending project of finding one's true self, the stigma of performance failure, compulsive gambling and other addictive escapes from the demands of responsibility, and so forth. One might well wonder if such diverse concerns lend themselves to a coherent overall narrative. To his credit, Crawford does manage to integrate his various concerns into a unified picture backed by suggested remedies for our ailments.

The title and sub-title of the book already announce an apparent tension between a study of external objectivity

and authentic subjectivity. But as is true of virtually all contemporary thinkers, Crawford does not settle for a dualistic subjectivity/objectivity contrast. Rather he seeks to overcome this potential dichotomy by arguing for a situated self whose embodied being is shaped by material context, meaning-laden traditions, and social relationships.

For Crawford, one of the causes of our societal problems is unquestioned allegiance to the ideal of autonomy in all its nakedness. Associated with this emphasis on personal sovereignty is the view that we are radically responsible for all our actions. A person's anxious response to such daunting accountability often leads to one or more of the previously mentioned social and personal dysfunctions. In a brief but persuasive section on America's ideological attachment to the rhetoric of freedom and autonomy, Crawford locates its source in Locke's political project of liberation, especially freedom from monarchical tyranny. The imposition of authority that one has not consented to is viewed by Locke and then Enlightenment thinkers as abusive and unjust. The logic of freedom extends beyond the political realm to questions of personal knowledge for Descartes as well as Locke. Uncritical acceptance of knowledge claims is seen to lead to a kind of epistemological servitude.

What do the early modern and Enlightenment thinkers believe is the way to secure liberation from servitude? They think we need procedural rules to ensure that no ungrounded illusions lead us astray. This occurs when we turn away from the uncertain construal of actual objects in the world and turn to “our own processes of thinking and making *them* the object of scrutiny” (121). Consequently, truth becomes understood as a proper *representation* of the world, not as something directly known through our involvement with the objects of the world. Moreover, in contrasting the ideal of autonomy with heteronomy, Kant seeks to ground morality in the free choice of persons as rational beings, not in the heteronomous influence of factors outside our will. The abstract universality of Kantian morality displaces the messy contingencies of empirical particularity.

The question Crawford would place before Kant is what factors actually influence rational choice. Kant ignores actuality and replaces it with the ideal of always intending to follow the moral law as articulated in the categorical imperative. This requires that one abstain from any special pleading and treat both person and morality in abstract, legalistic terms. “Kant is after a general theory of morality, based on pure *a priori* reasoning—like arithmetic...In rejecting ‘accidental circumstances’ and ‘the special constitution of human nature’ as too parochial a basis for moral reasoning, Kant provides the clearest point of contrast to the idea of the situated self that animates this book”

(266, n. 5). Crawford, like Polanyi, sees that our choices are based on many tacit factors: the cultural history we have often unconsciously indwelt, the lessons of personal experience, the biases built into language, etc. “How we act is not determined in an isolated moment of choice; it is powerfully ordered by how we perceive the situation, how we are attuned to it, and this is very much a function of our previous history of shaping ourselves to the world in a particular way” (75).

Not only do our history and culture influence how we choose, so also does our biological makeup. The Kant-influenced demand that we be autonomous, responsible persons can abstract us from our life experience, for sure, but it also places heavy demands upon choosing well. “Self-regulation, like attention, is a resource of which we have a finite amount” (16). And in our world, there are many forces—advertising, the Internet, demands of work—competing for our attention and concomitantly eroding our self-regulation. Crawford notes that “as autonomous individuals, we often find ourselves isolated in a fog of choice” (6; see also 162). And behind the choices is a confusing medley of purported reasons for accepting this choice rather than that choice.

Where can one find resources for overcoming our weariness at being assaulted with options? Where can one participate in situations that are rewarding and not simply exhausting? How might one find respite from the irritating demands on our attention? Crawford

offers advice related both to momentary attention and ongoing social practice.

The novelist David Foster Wallace felt afflicted by the tediousness of much modern life. He recommended controlling boredom and distaste by choosing what he pays attention to and imbuing it with meaning. Crawford affirms the importance of shifting attention away from what is frustrating or annoying one, but he questions Wallace's strategy of relying on choice and of trying to imagine something positive in its place. Irritants do not vanish through imaginative acts. Rather, Crawford opts for an erotics of attending to what attracts one in the world rather than a willful shift of imagination and belief, because "new energies come from real objects that one becomes interested in" (174).

With respect to long term social practice, Crawford believes the good life requires finding situations that allow for meaningful agency, situations that foster the development of skillful competence. One needs to get out of one's head and into the world. One needs to become subject to the demands of some worldly practice rather than stew in the broth of arbitrary personal choice. Crawford's title for one of his sections sums up the remedy well: "empowerment through submission" (128). One needs to submit to the reality of the world in one of its guises—a craft like organ building; one of the arts, like becoming a musician; one of the scientific disciplines, like chemistry; or, in reference to Crawford's earlier book, a trade, like being a motorcycle mechanic.

In such disciplines, the objects and their proper uses (often traditionally defined), not simply a contextless choice, set the standards for what one does. However, there is still room for some creative expression within the limits endemic to the practice. That is, there is room for the personal sense of accomplishment and pride that comes from developing greater competence and better outcome.

Crawford takes the literal meaning of education, "to lead out," and applies it to being led out of one's mind into the world and its practices. In describing his remedies for the ills of our time, Crawford makes good use of Polanyi's thought. He cites Polanyi's discussion of extending one's perception through a probe as an example of how embodiment and tacit factors are crucially involved in understanding empirical reality (47). Crawford appreciates "Polanyi's argument about the role of unspecifiable, tacit knowledge in expertise; his elaboration of personal commitment as the core of intellectual inquiry, understood as a craft skill; his demonstration that scientific competence is transmitted through apprenticeship to authoritative teachers" (139), and so on.

Rorty and others (including recently Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor) have argued that viewing cognition in terms of mental representation gives rise to unwarranted skepticism and relativism. It can be seen that Crawford subscribes to the retrieval of reality advocated by Dreyfus and Taylor, but he spells out the benefits of such retrieval more fully than they do.

Crawford is also sympathetic to the warnings about the disengaging role of virtual reality offered by Albert Borgmann. However, he offers his own take on the potential dangers of the electronically mediated world. Crawford observes that when a problem crops up on *Mickey Mouse Club*, magical technology is at hand to solve the problem. “To pursue the fantasy of escaping heteronomy through abstraction is to give up on skill, and therefore to substitute technology-as-magic for the possibility of real agency” (72). The electronic navigation screen on a Mercedes displaces skillful driving by the seat of one’s pants. This idiot-proofing abstraction “does not reflect fuzzy, subtle variations. Nor is it sensitive to changes that haven’t been anticipated and coded for ahead of time” (80). Electronic representation can become addictive; in that role it can become a refuge for the narcissist, one who has difficulty relating to other people and objects. Sherry Turkle, he notes, “locates the narcissism of the e-personality not in the grandiosity of our *self*-representations, but in the simple fact that we increasingly deal with others through representations of *them* that we have...In this domain we have a frictionless array of weak ties to other people who can be summoned according to our own needs” (176). Such a covering over of the challenges of experience obviously eviscerates the possibility of community, but it also undermines the possibility of potent individuality. For “it is by bumping up against other people, in conflict and cooperation, that we acquire

a sharpened picture of the world and of ourselves, and can begin to achieve an earned independence of judgment” (250).

Matthew Crawford’s eclectic book resists easy classification. Its title suggests it is a treatise on ontology and epistemology, but as it unfolds it becomes clear that Crawford’s primary concern is with ethics, ethics with a political veneer. As he says, his aim is to “reclaim certain possibilities of human flourishing” (x), which is the ultimate topic of ethics. It is a rich book. I have barely mentioned his powerful chapter on gambling, “Autism as a Design Principle,” or his longest chapter that deals with the organ makers’ shop, which brilliantly lays out the necessary interplay between traditional technology and contemporary technology if musical excellence is to be accomplished. I note that he makes good use of Polanyian epistemology. I think there is an inherent complementarity between the thought worlds of Crawford and Polanyi. Crawford could further develop his thought by attending to such features of Polanyian philosophy as spontaneous order in contrast to corporate order, the importance of public liberty, and the stratified nature of reality. But these suggestions for further work should in no way be taken to indicate anything other than my great respect for the work Crawford has in fact produced. It is a first rate achievement.

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