CONVIVIAL CRAFT-WORK AND THE FIDUCIARY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Matthew Crawford compares his program of convivial craft-work to Polanyi's fiduciary program. He argues that both are good ways of grappling with reality, and that both can help persons to focus their attention in an age of distraction. Crawford criticizes the Enlightenment philosophers for an overemphasis on the representations of things at the expense of grappling with the real things. He argues that attention is a scarce resource, analogous to water. He sometimes uses language that can be interpreted as expressing a belief in group minds.

In *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, Matthew Crawford offers his readers a philosophical anthropology (7), a philosophy of education (127) and a polemical political philosophy (248).[1] His philosophy complements that of Michael Polanyi. Polanyi drew on his experience as a chemist in formulating his philosophy of science, and Crawford draws on his experience as a motorcycle mechanic in formulating his philosophy of craft. Polanyi drew a parallel between science and craft, and Crawford says that the relation is "stronger than a mere analogy." He says that science and craft "are two expressions of the same mode of apprehending the world: by grappling with real things" (135).

Before I read Crawford's book, I was attracted by the realism suggested by the main title, but the subtitle led me to ask two questions: (1) does Crawford defend the

ideology of individualism? and (2) does he say that distraction is the biggest problem of our age? I did not have to read too far to be able to answer "no" to both questions. Crawford *does not* argue that distraction is the biggest problem of our age, and he does criticize of the ideology of individualism. He focuses on distraction because he believes that it prevents many people from becoming "fully-functioning persons" (Rogers 1962).

Ideal and Anti-Ideal Types

He argues that Enlightenment writers changed the picture of the ideal human, drawing a false picture that has had bad effects. He says,

> I find that these changes have a certain coherence to them, an arc—one that begins with the Enlightenment, accelerates in the twentieth century, and is perhaps culminating now. Though digital technologies certainly contribute to it, our current crisis of attention is the coming to fruition of a picture of the human being that was offered some centuries ago. This picture is so pervasive that it is difficult to make an object of scrutiny. At the center of it is a certain understanding of how a person encounters the world beyond his or her head (ix).

Crawford's phrase "the coming to fruition of a picture" suggests that the picture was a metaphorical seed that grew into a tree that is now bearing bad fruit. The metaphorical bad fruit is our "current crisis of attention." This crisis results in too many people finding is hard, if not impossible, to "maintain a coherent self" (ix).

This picture is less a visual image than it is verbal description of what Enlightenment writers presented as an ideal type. Crawford, however, denies the validity of that type, treating it as an anti-ideal, a picture of the kind of person one should try *not* to be. In addition to criticizing the false ideal, he also describes a true ideal. He hopes to mitigate our crisis of attention by getting more people to work with their hands and by persuading more people to have a different picture of how to encounter the world beyond their heads. He says:

> I offer what I take to be a more adequate picture of how we encounter objects and other people. My hope is that this alternative understanding can help us think clearly about our current crisis of attention, and reclaim certain possibilities of human flourishing (x).

This "more adequate picture" is the ideal type Crawford opposes to the Enlightenment picture that he judges to be the anti-ideal and is perhaps best captured by the British

title of his *Shop Craft as Soulcraft* (2009): *The Case for Working with Your Hands, Or, Why Office Work Is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good.*

Crawford says that the weight of his positive argument "is carried by case studies of attention in various skilled practices"(x). These case studies are brief ethnographies, and they are the best things in the book. They carry the weight of his positive prescriptions: *do* work with your hands; *do* work in solidarity with others; *do* talk with colleagues about your handiwork.

One of my favorite case studies is his description of the conversations between experienced and novice firefighters about a life and death question: how to know when to get out of a burning building. He uses this kind of conversation as a prototypical example of a *philosophical* conversation. A genuine philosophical conversation, like a genuine scientific or scholarly conversation, is one in which the participants subordinate all other desires to their desire to know the truth (62-63). Their heuristic passion makes them true lovers of wisdom about how to survive in a dangerous profession.

Parallel to Polanyi

Phil Mullins (2008, 159) says that in *Personal Knowledge* Polanyi wove together three distinct threads: "broad-based critical philosophizing, broad-based constructive philosophizing and articulation of a *Lebensphilosophie.*" Crawford interweaves these same three threads in *The World Beyond Your Head.* For both men, an important aspect of their critical philosophizing was the transformation of what many people mistakenly took to be an ideal into an anti-ideal. "I start," Polanyi said, "by rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment" (PK, vii). This is a multi-dimensional ideal. It includes an idealization of completely explicit knowledge and an idealization of complete precision in the use of language. Polanyi sometimes called this false ideal "objectivism." He said that it had not harmed the exact sciences because physicists and chemists paid little attention to it. "But we shall see," he promised, "that it exercises a destructive influence in biology, psychology and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science" (*PK,* vii). He argued that it often led to nihilism and moral inversion.

Just as Crawford hopes that establishing an alternative picture of what it means to be human will help others to "reclaim certain possibilities of human flourishing," Polanyi hoped "to establish an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally" (*PK,* vii). To embrace it is to follow his fiduciary program (*PK,* 264) and to accept the calling of being human (*PK,* 321). Although Crawford does not use the phrase "fiduciary program," the emphasis he puts on being submissive to traditions is very similar to what Polanyi meant by "fiduciary." Neither man advocated being submissive to *all* traditions, as is clear from their polemics against certain traditions that contain false ideals. But both men deny that we ought to reject traditional things *merely* because

they have been handed down from the past. A person must dwell in a tradition as a prerequisite to breaking out of it by new acts of discovery.

Attention as a Collective Problem

What Crawford means by "attention" is informed by Polanyi's articulation of what he meant by "attend." After describing Polanyi's notion of the *from-to* structure of knowing and doing, Crawford says that Polanyi "found that he had to use the word 'attend' in a new formulation" (47). A person using a probe attends *from* the sensations in his hand *to* the shape of the focal object at the tip of the probe. He is subsidiarily aware of the feelings in his hand only in terms of the focal object. To know or do skillfully is to attend *from* the subordinated particulars *to* a focal object. Crawford makes this notion of "attend" part of what he means by our crisis of attention.

Crawford says that the ability to pay attention "it is in the first place a faculty of individual minds" (4-5). He adds that "attention has also become an acute collective problem of modern life—a cultural problem." What I understand him to mean is that there are aspects of contemporary culture that make it harder for individual persons to pay attention to the world beyond their heads. I do not understand him to be using the big person metaphor, attributing to collectivities the ability to pay attention, as if it were a faculty of some kind of "group mind."

Crawford's language, however, sometimes leaves open the possibility of interpreting him as embracing something like a group mind. For example, in the following paragraph, it is possible to read him as using "we," "us" and "our" to point to a collectivity that performs cognitive acts:

> *Our* susceptibility to being buffeted by various claims on *our* attention is surely tied to the "intensification of nervous stimulation" that the German sociologist Georg Simmel identified with the metropolitan environment over a hundred years ago...The way *we* experience this, often, is as a crisis of self-ownership: *our* attention isn't simply *ours* to direct where *we* will, and *we* complain about it bitterly (5; italics added).

I do not read this as a tacit affirmation of the existence of a "group mind," but take his reiteration of the first person plural as a conventional way of saying "all of us," "most of us," "many of us," or "some of us."

Another example of language that can be interpreted to be a tacit affirmation of "group mind" occurs in the preface (ix), where he says that the problem of attention is so widely felt that "an entire society is compelled to ask anew a very old question: What does it mean to be human?" I don't believe that he imagines that the "entire society"

is a big person, able to perform the cognitive act of asking this question. I read him as saying that *many individual members* of society feel compelled to ask this old question.

Attention as a Metaphorical Resource

Clean air and clean water are *literal* resources, but attention is a *metaphorical* resource. Crawford says that it is easy to understand the importance and fragility of clear air and clean water.

> We also recognize that absent robust regulations, air and water will be used by some in ways that make them unusable for others—not because they are malicious or careless, but because they can make money using them this way. When this occurs, it is best understood as a *transfer of wealth* from "the commons" to private parties (11-12).

He points to the environmental degradation that can occur when the "gangsterish regimes" that have replaced Communism in some places fail to protect the commons by allowing the privatization of common goods such as air and water. He cautions us: "We in the liberal societies of the West find ourselves headed toward a similar condition with regard to the resource of attention, because we do not yet understand it to be a resource" (12). I say that attention is a resource only metaphorically. There is a big difference between the way air and water are resources and the way attention can be seen as a resource.

Crawford compares those who assail us with a cacophony of unwanted sounds and a kaleidoscope of unwanted images to the officials in the gangsterish regimes that privatize water. The big difference is that water is a *substance*, but attention is not. The *sources* of water should not be privatized, but there is a small-scale "privatization" of water that takes place whenever a person draws upon the commonly held source of water by drinking some of it. Her personal act makes that portion of water "private" by taking it into her body. Attention, however, is not a substance that can be be located in commonly held reservoirs. It is a faculty of individual persons. By attending to something, a person performs a personal act, but, unlike drinking, that act does not "privatize" a small share of a commonly owned substance. The movement involved in her act of attending is *from* her body and the indwelt subsidiaries *to* the world beyond her head. The movement involved in her act of drinking is *from* the world beyond her head *to* her thirsty body.

Representations, Mental and Cultural

Some of the things Crawford says about representations make me uneasy. On the first page of the preface, in his criticism of the Enlightenment picture of how a person "encounters the world beyond his or her head," he says: "We are said to do so only

through our mental *representations* of the world" (ix). He does show us that *some writers* have indeed said this. But he fails to convince me that any of them, or their readers, really believed it.

I contend Enlightenment writers, and readers, knew very well that the conception of a child results from sexual intercourse between a *real* man and a *real* woman. I can't imagine that a male Enlightenment writer thought that he could become a father by having sex with a mental representation of a woman. Nor do I believe that any of the mothers of the Enlightenment era believed that what she carried, gave birth to, and nursed was a mental representation of a baby. Any child or adult who *really* believed that he could survive by drinking only mental representations of water would soon die of thirst. Those who foolishly wrote that that humans encounter things only through their mental representations of them could not have survived long enough to write their treatises if they had really acted as if they believed what they wrote.

Crawford criticizes symbolic representation, and contrasts it with embodied representation. What he means by "symbolic representation" is the way computer code represents reality by strings of zeroes and ones, and he says that this kind of representation has a "grounding" problem. "How can arbitrary symbols *take on* meaning?" he asks. "How do they acquire propositional content and reference, such that they say something about the world?" (82-83). He says that embodied representation does not have this kind of problem.

I agree with his criticism of this kind of symbolic representation, but argue that what Jerome Bruner and his followers mean by "symbolic representation" is also a form of embodied representation (Bruner et al. 1966). They distinguish between enactive, iconic and symbolic representations, and treat all three as embodied. Think of having to drive from one place to another. If I have driven the route many times, my representation might be enactive. I will make the turns in the right places in much the same manner as a rat makes the correct turns in a maze it has learned to run successfully. If I haven't driven the route before, I might look at a map, and make a mental or "iconic" image of the map, and follow it successfully without having to take the paper map with me. Another way would be to get verbal directions from someone who knows the route. If I remember the verbal directions and follow them, this would be what Bruner means by "symbolic representation." My memories of the visible map and of the audible set of directions are embodied, just as is my kinesthetic memory of making the proper sequence of turns. I contend that I can have embodied iconic, symbolic and enactive representations of the world beyond my head at the same time, and that they do not interfere with one another.

Crawford's criticism of "symbolic representation" as defined by cognitive science seems to me to be valid only for what Lakoff and Johnson (1999) call "first generation cognitive science." That version of cognitive science relies on a faulty analogy between

the processes in the brain and processes in computers. "Second generation" cognitive science rejects that analogy, as does Crawford. The ways that the embodied brain functions are so different from the ways computers function that the differences overwhelm the similarities.

"Symbolic representation" can refer to skin-out, as well as skin-in things. We represent aspects of the world beyond our heads by using words and other kinds of cultural symbols that are themselves aspects of the world beyond our heads. It is to these external, skin-out symbols that Eric Voegelin (1952) refers when he describes the method of political science as the "critical clarification of symbolic representations of social reality." I take Voegelin's formulation to be a good characterization of the way all social scientists work, as well as a good characterization of what Crawford has done in *The World Beyond Your Head*. He clarifies and criticizes the symbolic representations created by Enlightenment writers of how we confront both things and other persons. By doing this, he gives us a better representation, using words and sentences, in the hope "that this alternative understanding can help us think clearly about our current crisis of attention, and reclaim certain possibilities of human flourishing" (x). But what he presents in his text is an alternative symbolic representation of how we confront persons and things. The understanding of his words is always an act of an individual reader.

Conclusion

Jack Gibbs (1989, 23) defines "attempted control" as "*overt* behavior by a human in the belief that (1) the behavior increases or decreases the probability of some subsequent condition and (2) the increase or decrease is desirable." To write *The World Beyond Your Head*, Crawford had to engage in overt behavior. I believe that he went through the labor of writing in the belief that it would increase the probability that his readers would have a better picture of how they grapple with the world beyond their heads. He desires this increase because it will decrease the degree to which many of us suffer from a crisis of attention. To be too often and too deeply distracted is an obstacle to human flourishing. I have long believed that following Polanyi's fiduciary program would help me to be a fully functioning person and Crawford has persuaded me that engaging in the kind of convivial craft-work he champions will also help.

ENDNOTE

[1]Page numbers for *The World Beyond Your Head* are given parenthetically.

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