

THE WORLD BEYOND YOUR HEAD: ON BECOMING AN INDIVIDUAL IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

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Attacks on digital technology for destroying our capacity for attention are a dime a dozen. Despite its title, Matthew Crawford's *The World Beyond Your Head* is not such an attack. It is far more ambitious. Somewhat to my surprise, it is a direct assault on the Enlightenment for ruining the habits of mind and practice that lead to human flourishing. Crawford says modern man is subject to delusions, birthed by the Enlightenment, that diffuse our perception of the world in a fog of unreality. He therefore sets himself up in as the paladin of reality, a champion badly needed by our times, offering a return to the solidity of the real, through excellence as developed in skilled practices.

Crawford is well known for his classic work, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, which has a similar, but less philosophical, focus on the real, with an emphasis on the value of manual work. Other recent books, such as Alexander Langlands's *Craeft*, also discuss the concrete works of the hand as essential to re-confer lost critical elements of a good society. *The World Beyond Your Head* offers a complete argument for what is wrong with how we view the world, and how we should view it instead. Yes, perhaps we should largely quit the digital world, but that is not really a matter with which Crawford concerns himself, and is not the root of the problem, rather a symptom.

This is not a polemical or a political book. It is dense and as a result rewards close attention and re-reading of passages. But its purpose, the recentering of our humanity, is clear from the very first, since the book's epigraph is a quote from Vincent van Gogh, "The great thing is to gather new vigor in reality." Such vigor has been destroyed by "the coming to fruition of a picture of the human being that was offered some centuries ago." That picture, at root, is of man as able to be wholly autonomous and to interact with the world through subjective representations of the world, rather than directly with the world as it really is. This method of viewing reality is a basic error that harms the individual and society as a whole. But there is a solution: willed attention to concrete practices that require skill.

The key present manifestation of the problem, Crawford begins by saying, is the enormous number of demands on our attention, from being bombarded by advertisements at all times, especially when we are a captive audience, to email and text communication. Silence is no longer golden. A perfect example I can offer, though not covered in this 2015 book, is how Netflix now, when browsing selections, if you rest for more than a second on any possible choice in the menu, auto-plays a huge, blaring, jumpy trailer—which you cannot turn off. That is, you cannot browse and consider any choice, reading a summary at your own pace, without continual slamming, booming demands to watch right now (which also give away the plot of the show offered). As Crawford says, everywhere silence has become a luxury good, available, for example, only to wealthy people in public places like airports, when it is available at all.

His objection is not merely the chaos. True, we face the paradox of choice, that too much choice itself makes it difficult and frustrating to choose. And he is concerned that we have lost the ability, among the noise, to choose what to value. But his real objection is deeper—that each of us has lost the ability to have our choices “answered for us by settled forms of social life.” We have been liberated; we are all autonomous individuals, and so “we often find ourselves isolated in a fog of choices,” with no basis to choose, even if we cut through or ignore the noise. Into the gap steps “massification” (shades of José Ortega y Gasset), commodified and commercialized, “ironically, under the banner of individual choice.” This choice, regardless of whether it should be exalted, is not, contrary to what we are told, a “welling-up of our authentic self,” but the result of massive social engineering designed to profit from us. This combination of atomized choice with being led around by the nose, leads to “hassle,” not to joy, and this, our living in the “age of distraction,” with “a partial view of the human person,” is a major reason modern life, as so lived, is the opposite of flourishing, instead subject to innumerable pathologies.

Thus, some of Crawford’s objection is to the mass consumerism that characterizes our society, the bastard child of the Enlightenment and corporate neoliberalism. We are encouraged to buy, buy, buy, and to free ourselves from any part in the web of society. So, for example, I have noticed a recent extremely aggressive trend to encourage women

to buy for themselves expensive items such as jewelry, traditionally bought for them as gifts by men who are their husbands or boyfriends. No doubt our corporate overlords have noticed that the massive numbers of women whom they in past decades encouraged to choose an assertive corporate career are now, as a direct result, single, childless, and lonely, but also have plenty of money to desperately spend on this fresh fantasy of siloed self-completeness. The dissolution of all unchosen bonds, the result of Enlightenment philosophy filtered through the modern Left and allied with worship of the market, leads inevitably to this pathos, examples of which could be multiplied all day long. It feels like individual choice, but it is really a dank prison of the soul.

The answer, Crawford says, or part of the answer, is for each person to fight back, to create a “coherent,” “situated” self through skilled practices. This is education in opposition to massification, and allows us to control and guide our mental environment, rather than living as a rat in a maze. Skilled practices, hemmed in by reality, allow focus and individual growth. We resist this because “the experience of attending to something isn’t easily made sense of within the prevailing Western anthropology that takes autonomy as the central human good.” The opposite of autonomy, heteronomy, being ruled by something outside your own head, is a threat to this Enlightenment anthropology. If there is a simple summation of this book, it is that autonomy, our brazen idol since John Stuart Mill, should and must yield to and be balanced with heteronomy.

It is no wonder we worship autonomy—it is flattering to us. But it is false. The world constrains us, whether we admit it or not, and through proper disciplined attention to those constraints, the “framing conditions” of our life, we can become fully human. This is, really, simply the “ordered freedom” of the pre-Enlightenment philosophers; Crawford prefers to drop the term “freedom” as carrying too much baggage, and focus on “agency,” rightly-ordered human action, through which we “reclaim the real.” But either way, the point is the same.

That’s all at the start of the book. The rest is exposition and expansion. We start with jigs. Given that we have only so much mental capacity, in order to accomplish, we have to find ways to streamline mental activity. For someone undertaking a skilled practice, this is done by a jig—a term taken from woodworking and metalworking, but applicable more

broadly, to any method of constraining mental choice in order to better accomplish a goal. For example, how a short order cook arranges instruments and ingredients is a jig. This is different from Cass Sunstein's "nudge" (for which Crawford has thinly-veiled contempt), because it is executed by the practitioner in coordination with the reality of his tools, his goal, and his environment, including that of other people, not something imposed by an outsider divorced from the matter at hand. The only reason nudges from the administrative state exist is because they replace "cultural jigs," that is, the embedded social practices that used to guide our lives, which we destroyed by the idolization of the autonomous self. And because of that destruction, we are nudged continuously by the consumer state, more so than even by the administrative state. We seek total freedom, and we instead are corralled. And this results in even more damaging effects on those sections of society that are not wealthy and lack the capacity for self-regulation; the dismantling of the "marital jig" in the name of personal autonomy has been enormously destructive of the lower orders of society.

Next we turn to perception, of the world beyond your head. Crawford's complaint is that in the modern world we are told that perception is representational, subjective to the individual. But this is false. Perceptions, properly viewed, are actually wholly embodied in the world outside your head, and as you become more skilled, your perceptions are more accurate, meaning more in tune with reality. If you are a motorcycle racer, denying this is obviously catastrophic. It is also catastrophic for others, just less visibly so. If we soften the boundary between ourselves and the world, by using representations to filter and diffuse reality, we distort our sense of agency, placing ourselves at the center of a false view of the world. Crawford cleverly contrasts old Mickey Mouse cartoons, which show children the heteronomy of the natural world and how the cartoon characters react to it and overcome it by their own agency, with the modern Mickey Mouse Clubhouse television show, where all problems are solved for children by chanting "Oh Tootles!", causing the Handy Dandy machine to appear, offering a menu of godlike solutions from which the child chooses and which are executed by machines without the child's needing to be involved in any way except observing. No problem cannot be solved; the child's autonomy from the world is always preserved through superior

separation from it. Here Crawford is openly contemptuous of this taught gelatinous narcissism. "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."

For all this, stepping back, Crawford formally blames the Enlightenment project of autonomy, culminating for these purposes in Immanuel Kant, who "put the freedom of the will on a new footing, where it will float free of all natural necessities." Unfettered choice, unconstrained even by reality, seems attractive, but it is a snare, and we become passive recipients of the representations of the world, the false "manufactured experiences" offered by consumer capitalism; "those who present choices to us appear as handmaidens to our own freedom." It is a false freedom; as with today's Mouseketeers, "The fantasy of autonomy comes at the price of impotence."

The extreme end of this is modern machine gambling. In a fascinating chapter, Crawford describes how the "gaming" experience is manipulated to offer the illusion of agency and choice, but instead drives the frequent player to desire not winning, but a nihilistic state of losing everything, becoming wholly spent, while merging with the machine, all the while offering a false vision of acquired skill. They call this "player-centric design." It is horrifying. Through this example, Crawford attacks the libertarian Enlightenment falsehood that individuals are "radically responsible for themselves" as a destructive myth that gives those who wish to profit from us power over us. We have absorbed the idea that we should not impose our values on others; thinking so "gives us a pleasant feeling: we have succeeded in not being paternalistic or presumptuous." This leads to less autonomy, as we are led around by the nose, and "neutralizes our critical energies." Crawford never comes right out and says it, but it's pretty obvious he regards the entire Enlightenment project of autonomy as an unmitigated disaster. "By keeping his gaze away from such facts, the liberal/libertarian keeps his own soul pure, lest he commit the sin of recommending to others some substantive ideal, one that will necessarily be controversial. But outside his garden wall there are wolves preying on the townspeople." Take that, John Stuart Mill!

The problem here is not gambling as such. Low-level vice of this type will always exist; the trick for a well-run society is to limit it, both in

its overall scope and, to the extent possible, to that segment of society that is least damaged by it. The pre-1980 American system, where gambling was possible only in a few places, or abroad, and no lotteries were allowed, was of this type. Gambling one could not afford was strongly discouraged by the government and stigmatized by polite society, a sound approach that disappeared under the twin hammers of politicians' lust for voluntary self-taxation and cries for more autonomy, framed as non-judgmentalism. When Foundationalism is in charge, we're returning to the old system.

Anyway, most of the rest of the book is detailed descriptions of several "ecologies of attention and action" that demonstrate embedded reality ("embedded" is one of Crawford's favorite words), intertwined with philosophical ruminations tied to the subject matter. The effect is somewhat rambling, but well worth the read. Before he gets there, in "A Brief History of Freedom," Crawford machine-guns John Locke for failing to see that his program for political freedom was destructive when taken beyond a narrow context, and rejects the idea that reality is not self-revealing, but mediated through subjective representations. This idea is so seductive, and so bound up with our own exalted view of ourselves and our supposedly advanced society, that it is difficult to argue against. But that is Crawford's project. And while taking about the ecologies on which he focuses, Crawford weaves in René Descartes, Iris Murdoch, David Foster Wallace, G. W. F. Hegel, and Johann Fichte. Also lots of Tocqueville, not only from *Democracy in America* but more from *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. And we get Friedrich Nietzsche, for the proposition that "the great moments in the struggle of individuals form a chain, [and] in them the high points of humanity are linked throughout millennia." Apparently the Bronze Age Mindset is alive and well among short-order cooks, motorcycle racers, and organ makers, the embedded realities on which Crawford focuses.

Ecologies of attention are skills that are developed through a "mutually adaptive" process of working within reality, both of materials and other people, both of which, in any given area of skill, have greater authority than the beginner's own perceptions or belief in his own autonomy, which is essentially irrelevant and destructive. "Authenticity" is a crock, if it means autonomic individualism. Instead, accomplishment relies on submission to authority. The 1960s promised us the

sovereign individual; the economic updraft that coincided with the explosion of atomization required that everyone prove his adequacy, or be weighed in the balance and found wanting. No longer could he rely on the web of society around him for his worth; the result, for those not at the top, is weariness and depression. We can push back against this by rediscovering skilled practices, which command respect for reasons internal to the practice.

“Joy is the feeling of one’s powers increasing.” To do this, we must cultivate excellence and skill. Skilled practices are not, or are not much, subject to the vice of subjectivism about excellence and skill, “moral autism.” But subjectivism is the idiom of the age, creating a “curious combination of self-aggrandizement (what makes something good is how I feel about it) and timidity.” That timidity comes from looking around at what everyone else thinks, because authority is gone, but we know we are not competent, in most areas, to judge for ourselves, so we rush to conformity. The remedy for the anxiety produced by atomized individualism is conformity—massification, again shades of Ortega. We bow to frauds like Alfred Kinsey, new self-consecrated priests preaching a fraudulent gospel of statistical normality, so we are freed of the unbearable burden of owning our own choices. Unbridled individualism merely leads to dessicated collectivism. Crowdsourcing does not lead to improved knowledge or better choices; there is no “earned independence of judgment” there.

Crawford is not preaching an alternate gospel, of return to the authorities and pieties of the past. They are gone. If he were me, this is the point at which he would instead start preaching about the creation of a new thing, informed by the wisdom of the old, and that the only way out is through. Instead, he goes even more concrete, continuing to preach the real, through the last quarter of the book being an exposition of pipe organ building and rebuilding. He examines a group of craftsmen in rural Virginia, who for some decades have operated a shop for such craft. This is an archetypical embedded skill, reliant on centuries of history and predecessors, as well as other partners in the craft. It is the antithesis of the Silicon Valley hero emerging like Moses from his garage with wholly new technology. Rather, “This is a story of the progressive possibilities of tradition.”

Much of this is fascinating simply as craft, and there are lessons to be had—the 1960s and 1970s saw the ill-considered use of non-traditional materials in organ building that did not last, yet carbon fiber is now used in some applications for its unique properties and longevity. The point is we need not aim to slavishly reproduce the past; instead, the craftsmen aspire to the goal of achieving, or restoring, the most beautiful music (and what is that most beautiful music is itself the fruit of a cultural tradition). Sometimes that means “going further on a trajectory they have inherited.” These craftsmen are rebels, Crawford tells us, for they rebel “against the self-satisfaction of the age,” instead earning the right to independent judgment about the application of their craft.

What they do not do is exalt their autonomy, or suggest that their judgment has merit because it is mediated through visions of reality that they have created in their head, dissociated from the world as it is. From this hold on reality flowed human flourishing before the Enlightenment set us on the seductive path that has, at its end, revealed its fatal flaws. And it is through a return to a society based on this grasp of reality that we may yet get our society back on track. Me, I think that’s a bit too optimistic, and that would merely be the first step. It took hundreds of years to build the West; it cannot be rebuilt in a day, and there is a strong argument that no society can be rebuilt, and a new thing must replace the old. But if that new thing is based on the principles found in embedded practices, that will be a solid foundation, and in the meantime, individuals can improve their own lives through what Crawford recommends, waiting for the future to arrive, and ignoring as best they can the corrupt freak show that our broader society has become.