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# On Why the \*Disciple\* Knows More

LISA LICKONA

**Matthew B. Crawford**, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015 ).

I was captured from the first pages of Matthew B. Crawford's *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, for I could not help but identify with the multitasking Mr. Platt of the *Onion* piece he cites—a man whose head is kept spinning by the relentless demands of life. With his attention restlessly flitting from one object to the next, he finds himself unable to be truly present to anything or anyone: “joy can get no grip on him” (7).

Mr. Platt serves to introduce Crawford's point: attention is a dwindling resource in our day. And this should give us pause, for the ability to give one's sustained attention to something or someone outside oneself is at the heart of learning; education, Crawford argues, demands a certain asceticism. Moreover, even as we find our bliss clicking and swiping through the worlds coming to us through our computers and our phones, we find ourselves more and more at the mercy of others who decide what we see and what we do not see. *They* keep our heads spinning. We sense that our freedom, our true agency and, ultimately, as in Mr. Platt's case, our capacity for joy, are under attack.

Crawford crafts a response to this situation, an “ethics of attention for our time, grounded in a realistic account of the mind and a critical gaze at modern culture” (7). He takes special aim at Enlightenment thought, especially Immanuel Kant. In trying to salvage the self that was dissected and reduced by Hobbes, Locke and Descartes, Kant rebuilds it as a supreme sovereign, independent of all outside input—the basis of our capitalist consumer-chooser. But, Crawford argues, Kant's version of how self meets world does not hold up. Drawing on modern studies of perception, cognition and his own deft philosophizing, Crawford shows that the self—and thus freedom and individuality—must develop through an encounter with the world outside itself, through a submission to things, other people and the collected inheritance of tradition.

Crawford's self is embodied and embedded, a skilled hockey player who experiences the stick as an extension of his body, a glassblower who creates in an un-choreographed but highly-ordered dance with his colleagues, a motorcycle rider whose near-misses and close escapes hone his abilities. His is a vision of “human excellence. . . of a powerful, independent mind working at full song” (26). Through his multi-layered reflection, Crawford awakens us to human freedom as a human flourishing, and reason robustly engaged, no longer—as in Kant and his ilk—a mere handmaid of personal preference.

I found myself craving the kind of fullness that Crawford presents—the surging delight of the experienced short-order cook working at full tilt, the race-car driver at one with the road, the organ-maker ensconced in his venerable tradition. And this is one of his finer points. Our fruitful relationship

with the real is not only one of engagement and, frankly, submission, but it is “erotic”: we are *drawn* to the world outside ourselves; we seek a “fit” with the world. Crawford salvages education as a “being led out.” He rescues beauty and a religious sense that sees reality as somehow “personal.” “Affection for the world as it is: this could be taken as the motto for a this-worldly ethics” (253).

True to his background as both political philosopher and motorcycle mechanic, Crawford is a real everyman’s thinker. Several chapters stand out. “Virtual Reality as Moral Ideal” tells the story of the evolution of Disney’s Mickey Mouse club from slapstick comedy with real-world dangers—buckets, traps and springs—to a gentler educational bubble in which problems are solved by the push of a button—all as an illustration of the perils of Enlightenment epistemology.

In “Autism as a Design Principle: Gambling” Crawford shows how the sort of dissipation of agency that plagues the autistic child is actually an aim of the creators of casino culture, a “design principle” that is supported by appeals to personal freedom. I found myself rushing to photocopy this chapter for my own teens, to help them grasp the forces at play in an industry that increasingly targets them. And in “The Culture of Performance,” Crawford reveals how the sovereign self has evolved in the wake of the bra-burning 1960’s—freer than ever from “tyrannical” authority, but also bereft of traditions and contexts that provide a secure place in the world. For today’s workers, “the ideal of being experienced has given way to the ideal of being flexible” (163). And so: “The affliction of guilt has given way to weariness—weariness with the vague and unending project of having to become one’s fullest self. We call this depression” (165). When depression meets the post-Cartesian reduction of the self to a collection of bio-chemical interactions, we are left with but one solution: Prozac. Once again, I was at the photocopier, thinking of the angsty twenty-somethings in my life.

For a moment, technology seems to take it on the chin: for Crawford our technologies are often just incarnations of our need to insulate the sovereign self, always in danger from others and thus always in need of protective mediating realities. (Think of the hermetically-sealed car engine that shields us from that mess of mechanical things and our smart phones that insulate us from the people right next to us.) But, really, Crawford just presents a different vision of technology, one that is aligned with his epistemology. In the extended interlude that forms the final part of the book, he shows us what technology looks like in the hands of a skilled organ maker, where tools and materials serve sounds, building structure, liturgical style and even the economics of the marketplace. Crawford does not hate technology; he grounds it in a sweeter vision of human excellence than that to which we are accustomed.

This book is much needed. And I, for one, am won over. Let’s reclaim the real.

*Lisa Lickona, STL, is a wife and mother of eight children living in central New York. She operates a small micro-organic farm and serves as the Editor for Saints for Magnificat.*

