



Attention Deficit

Diana Schaub

Pay Attention! It's not easy, is it? And all the signs are that it is getting harder. In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew B. Crawford joins the chorus bewailing the "crisis of attention." While many cultural critics focus on the disintegrative effects of digital technology, Crawford, without at all denying those effects, searches for a more comprehensive explanation, finding it in the philosophic anthropology that undergirds modern science and technology. His description of the Enlightenment foundations of the atomized and even (in a sense) "autistic" self, while nicely done, is not entirely new either. What is original is the diagram he sketches of the complex gears and circuitry connecting the assumptions of Descartes, Locke, and Kant to the observable features of contemporary life. What is even more remarkable is his unfolding of an alternative, more satisfying way—still available though often overlooked—of

engaging the world. That Matthew Crawford should write a fascinating, beautiful, and practical book should come as no surprise to those familiar with his earlier breakout bestseller *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009). Both books deliver a rare experience: the sudden recognition of rightness, of attunement, of "fit" (a word Crawford favors) between thought and things.

In the first of three parts, Crawford makes sense of an array of seemingly disparate, but uniformly grim, phenomena: such things as the fragile, flat, and depressive character of the modern self and the way in which this supposedly autonomous self falls ready prey to massification and manipulation by corporate entities that engineer a hyper-stimulating, hyper-palatable artificial environment. Lost in the virtual shuffle are solid goods like silence (a precondition for thinking), self-control (a precondition for coherent individuality), and true sociality.

*The World Beyond Your Head:
On Becoming an Individual in
an Age of Distraction*

By Matthew B. Crawford

FSG ~ 2015 ~ 305 pp.

\$26 cloth

Crawford is particularly good at showing how forms of pseudo-reality are being deliberately manufactured, not in obedience to some inner dynamic of technological progress, but rather in accord with “our modern identification of freedom with choice, where choice is understood as a pure flashing forth of the unconditioned will.” Freedom, thus conceived, is essentially escapist; we seek to avoid any direct encounter with the tangible world outside our elaborately buffered me-bubble. I saw this impulse at work when our young son would flee from the pain of watching a game his Orioles seemed destined to lose, retreating to a video version of baseball in which he could basically rig a victory. He preferred an environment he could control to the psychic risk of real engagement. I thought we had done enough by setting strict time limits and restricting his gaming options to sports only. But it became obvious that the availability of this tyrannical refuge was an obstacle to his becoming a better lover of baseball (and, down the road, a better friend, husband, and father).

One of Crawford’s examples is the design of cars, about which he knows a lot, being himself a fabricator of custom motorcycle parts. To his disgust, the aim of auto design for some time now has been to break the connection between the driver and the road, by substituting mediated experience for felt experience. Here’s how he describes it:

More broadly, the design of automobiles has tended toward insulation, offering an ever less involving driving experience. The animating ideal seems to be that the driver should be a disembodied observer, moving through a world of objects that present themselves as though on a screen. We have throttle by wire, brake by wire, and electrical assist (versus hydraulic assist) brakes, as well as traction control and antilock brakes that modulate our driving inputs for us. What all this idiot-proofing and abstraction amounts to is a genuine poverty of information reaching the driver.

When virtual reality assumes the status of a moral ideal, we become more distanced from our own embodiment and the centering that provides. As physical beings we are oriented by proximity and distance. The advent of a world in which mediated representations are pervasive threatens, quite literally, to dis-orient us.

I can take a virtual tour of the Forbidden City in Beijing, or of the deepest underwater caverns, nearly as easily as I glance across the room.... But where am I? There doesn’t seem to be any nonarbitrary basis on which I can draw a horizon around myself—a zone of relevance—by which I might take my bearings and get oriented. When the axis of closer-to-me and farther-from-me is collapsed, I can be anywhere, and find that I am rarely in any place

in particular. To be present with those I share a life with is then one option among many, and likely not the most amusing one at any given moment. More broadly, to compose a coherent life on the principle of disembodied, ungrounded choice would seem to be a daunting task.

Crawford descends into the most repulsive depths of this flattened existence in the culminating chapter of the book's first part. He explores the nefarious design principles of machine gambling, showing how an illusion of agency is constructed. Since the 1980s, with the invention of "virtual reel mapping," there has been a distorted connection between the display reel (what the gambler sees and believes) and the "virtual reels (where the odds are really being played out)." Not surprisingly, the odds are dramatically worse than they appear to be. Further techniques, such as clustering the stops near the jackpot symbols, give slots players a false sense of frequent near misses, heightening the compulsion to continue playing.

Always on the verge of winning, he is led to believe that he is developing an arcane skill, an intuitive connection to the machine's obscure workings. He is not. The frequency with which he almost wins can be made to increase over the course of his play in a single session, and because players are tracked, it can be made to increase from one session to the next as

well, leading to a feeling of growing mastery.

This deceit in favor of the house allowed casinos to add immensely popular mega-jackpots—a proven lure for new players. While neophytes pursue elusive wins, the hardened players move beyond the quest for success into "the zone"—a trance-like, immersive state where they will play, and even desire to play, "to extinction" (not a nickel left). Every aspect of the industry is geared to draw players into this passive zone of sustained repetitive automaticity. At the extreme of "desubjectification," a player "experiences himself as part of the machine."

Interestingly, the gaming industry was quite pleased that the psychiatric profession declared "pathological gambling" a disorder, since that designation narrows the problem to a small class of individuals who suffer from a medical condition, thus obscuring the fact, which Crawford highlights, that the "addictive quality of the machines... arises from an interaction between our (normal) psychological makeup and the dark arts of attentional design. The plasticity of our neural pathways is such that repetition coupled with random reinforcement issues in addiction. This is the foundation of the business model."

How should we respond to the ready availability of corrosive activities, whether slots in

convenience stores or Internet pornography or just the constant, unwanted, commercialized intrusions on our attention? For Crawford, the dominant libertarian response—live and let live—is inadequate. Because the libertarians assume a world of autonomous individuals and fail to understand the situated character of human life, they don't comprehend the nature of these new threats to the pursuit of a good life; in sum, they have "an outdated view of where the threats to freedom lie."

In response to the manifold ways that meaningful action is being degraded, Crawford does not recommend any specific prohibitionist legislation, although that doesn't mean he wouldn't support sensible restrictions, especially those based on his idea of an "attentional commons" in need of protection (Pull the plug on the Muzak!). Instead, he devotes Parts 2 and 3 of *The World Beyond Your Head* to elaborating a counter-anthropology, "a positive account of action in its full human context." In place of the solipsistic self, he offers the attentive self. Attention, properly understood, is "the faculty that joins us to the world"—the real world of real things, things with heft and resistance (or perhaps the opposite: delicacy and pliability) that require art to handle and craft. Crawford presents case studies of "skilled practices": hockey players, short-order cooks, and glass blowers. He shows how subordinating oneself to the

authority of the object (the intransigent demands of that particular form of matter) generates "highly structured patterns of attention" that, in turn, lead to the acquisition of such rewarding qualities as excellence, judgment, and individuality. This is not a consumerist version of the pursuit of happiness, but a craft or guild version. The "achieved individuality" he describes is richer and more variegated, because rooted in highly distinct "ecologies of attention" and acculturated communities united, essentially, by knowledge and beauty.

Part 3 is entirely devoted to one such fraternity: the makers of pipe organs. While necessarily delving into the arcana (the nodes and antinodes of the pipes, chuff, nicking the languids, leathering and nibbling), the chapter is a sustained reflection on the meaning of apprenticeship and the "dialectic of reverence and rebellion" it invites one to join. It must be stressed that Crawford's book is not a nostalgic paean to a bygone era. Although he is cutting against the grain of contemporary culture, his presentation of what it means to be fully in the world—the world beyond your head—is forward-looking. He is interested in the "progressive possibilities of tradition." This is an uplifting book, soaring and swelling like a pipe organ blasting Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. His aim is to "reinterpret what are often taken to be encumbrances to the personal will

in the modern tradition—sources of unfreedom—and identify them rather as the framing conditions for any worthwhile human performance.”

Confirmation of Crawford’s claims seems all around. A radio interview I happened to hear with the legendary fisherman, fly tyer, and nature author Lefty Kreh stood out as an example of “autotelic” activity—activity pursued for its own sake. I also found myself trying to extend Crawford’s argument, wondering whether his notion of skilled practices might shed new light on a craft he did not consider: statecraft. After reading Crawford, it makes perfect sense that our two greatest presidents, Washington and Lincoln, had the least formal education (and that they worked as land surveyors as young men), while our most academically credentialed presidents (Professor Wilson and Senior Lecturer Obama) were both dangerously out of touch with the world as it is.

Admirable political figures (at least the ones I admire) seem to have experience in the kinds of activities that Crawford celebrates. Think of Winston Churchill building brick walls at Chartwell and, later in life, joyously taking up a paintbrush (see his colorful essay “Painting as a Pastime,” which tells one almost as much about the art of generalship as about painting). In his autobiography *My Early Life* (1930), Churchill

lamented the artificiality and irrelevance of his classical education at Harrow:

I would far rather have been apprenticed as a bricklayer’s mate, or run errands as a messenger boy, or helped my father to dress the front windows of a grocer’s shop. It would have been real; it would have been natural; it would have taught me more; and I should have done it much better.

Abraham Lincoln too, who had no fondness for manual labor, having had enough of it on the hardscrabble farm of his father, nonetheless did have a great interest in the physical principles of nature and the construction of machinery, in regard to which he had extraordinary powers of observation. Biographer Fred Kaplan notes that Lincoln had a “fascination from an early age with the human, the mechanical, and the natural, how things work in this world.” Lincoln’s fascination reached its most mature, philosophic expression in his 1859 “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions.” After satirizing the grasping hubris of “Young America” (analogous to Crawford’s critique of the independence-obsessed Enlightenment), Lincoln sketches an alternative approach to the world that begins from “a *habit* of observation.” Like Crawford, Lincoln regarded science, art, and craft as communicative endeavors: “What one observes, and would himself infer nothing from, he tells to another, and that other at once

sees a valuable hint in it. A result is thus reached which neither *alone* would have arrived at.” The discoveries and inventions that contribute to human advancement are a hands-on, cognitive enterprise among fellow laborers, not only in the present but across generations. For Lincoln, the highest of these human arts, the architectonic art, was the art of self-government.

A final historical figure who came powerfully to mind while reading Crawford was Booker T. Washington. Washington famously argued for an educational approach that fully integrated the hand and heart with the head. Crawford calls our current curriculum “disembodied,” and he’s right. He quotes from woodshop teacher Doug Stowe about the soul-killing effect on students: “Without the opportunity to learn through their hands, the world remains abstract, and distant, and the passions for learning will not be engaged.” It is time for a general revival of Washington’s vision of Industrial Education—although probably not the term itself, since the adjective “industrial” was always something of a misnomer. What Washington really

called for was an education of the whole person, tapping into our natural longings for both beauty and usefulness. It must be emphasized that neither Crawford nor Washington is against book learning (after all, Washington, in close cooperation with financier Julius Rosenwald, was responsible for the construction of 4,977 schools throughout the South and Crawford has a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago). What they seek is a larger, not a narrower, education. Washington’s last autobiography is entitled *My Larger Education* (1911); its first chapter: “Learning from Men and Things.” Of books themselves, Washington counseled his students at Tuskegee: “I want you to bear in mind that your text books, with all their contents, are not an end, but a means to an end, a means to help us get the highest, the best, the purest and the most beautiful things out of life.” Matthew Crawford’s *The World Beyond Your Head* makes my permanent list of books that help us do precisely that.

Diana Schaub, a New Atlantis contributing editor, is professor of political science at Loyola University Maryland.