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Review of

Media and Moral Education: A Philosophy of Critical Engagement

by Laura D'Olimpio, New York: Routledge, 2019

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Is a critical, compassionate spectatorship of mass media possible? This is the chief inquiry underlying Laura D'Olimpio's *Media and Moral Education*, which blends elements of ethics, art criticism, media literacy, and educational theory to make a case for the importance of philosophical thinking in enhancing technology-based communications. D'Olimpio argues in favour of what she calls "critical perspectivism": an ethical attitude toward the multiple perspectives presented in mass art and media, achieved through a balance of critical and compassionate engagement. She deems such an attitude especially important in a post-truth internet culture where information is abundant, rapidly changing, and rarely reliable at face value. In her view, a critical perspectivist is able to distinguish between the content and its consumer or creator, at least to the extent that they exhibit compassion for the latter as a fellow human being. They do this even as they lend a critical eye on the former through careful examination and argumentation.

According to D'Olimpio's argument, if a critically perspectival attitude can enhance the process of deciding beliefs and values both on and offline, it becomes all the more crucial because such decision-making can in turn affect the moral treatment of others. In her opening chapters, she provides an overview of critical perspectivism's importance, then narrows in on its compassionate and critical features in her middle chapters, drawing on key ideas from Martha Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, as well as aesthetic accounts of mass art by theorists like T. W. Adorno and Gilles Deleuze. In her subsequent chapter on multiliteracies, through varied examples of recent multimedia trends, she describes what critical perspectivism might look like in practice, referencing online actions like #IllRideWithYou as prime instances of people challenging prevailing discriminatory stances in favour of more civic responses reflecting rational compassion (p. 90).[1] Finally, in her closing chapter, in light of what she sees as critical perspectivism's moral potential in the face of technology's increasing grip on communications, D'Olimpio argues it should be integrated into young people's education, notably through pedagogical methodologies that can foster critical and compassionate engagement like the

[1] This hashtag refers to the international viral response to severe racial profiling on social media during the Sydney Siege of 2014: while a terrorist gunman held people hostage in a café, thousands of Australians offered to meet local Muslim people to ride with them on public transport in solidarity against Islamophobic sentiment.

Philosophy for Children (P4C) model.[2]

The following review thus has a specific aim in mind: to strive to apply the critical perspectivism that D'Olimpio proposes in *Media and Moral Education* to her own argument by drawing on some philosophical inquiry strategies from the P4C method she espouses. The review draws particularly on those thinking tools believed to help inquirers reflect beyond their own frameworks and preferences, well-reasoned as these may seem. Since I share many of D'Olimpio's philosophical sensibilities and pedagogical commitments—including similar theoretical presuppositions and educational practices—I am acutely aware of the bias that may cause me to find in her book the kind of cozy echo-chamber that motivates her claims against limited perspectives (p. 8).[3] As such, I will make a concerted effort to consider unexplored angles and opposite viewpoints by imagining what someone who thinks differently might say, hopefully in both a compassionate and critical manner.

As a lead-in, it is worth briefly sharing the backdrop of this review. I read *Media and Moral Education* on an airplane, sandwiched between two passengers: an elderly woman flipping through a tabloid newspaper—the cover prominently displaying the type of hoaxes and fake news that D'Olimpio bemoans—and a teenager absorbed by various easily digestible listicles downloaded on his smart phone. In the moment, I could not help but wonder about the possible optics of the scene: how a cynical outsider might too quickly read it as emblematic of the book's concerns: sophisticated "high culture" content wedged between mass media drivel. And yet, thinking in reverse through a contrasting perspective, I realised I could be representative of the one at fault: perhaps my neighbours were critically analysing what they were consuming whereas I was just happily agreeing with an argument that happened to resonate with my deepest beliefs and aspirations. From the outside, it is difficult to gauge someone's engagement with content, suggesting it is not merely the *what* but the *why*, *who* and *how* that matter when considering the viability of critical perspectivism. In the next sections, I shall examine each of these dimensions in turn, as they respectively address issues around philosophy's contribution, minimum thresholds, and timing implications.

The Why of Critical Perspectivism: Philosophy's Contribution

Beginning with the "why" dimension, the reasons someone engages with content on and offline seem extremely relevant to D'Olimpio's argument. What are their aims? Their motivations? Their intentions?

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[2] D'Olimpio portrays P4C's community of philosophical inquiry method—in which children are united in the critical exploration of possible answers to a question they find meaningful—as providing "richly contextual dialogue and encounters that challenge our preconceived notions…encourag[ing] compassion as a rational emotion and such amoral virtue is underpinned by the recognition that fellow participants in a dialogue are embodied, thinking and feeling human beings much life oneself" (p. 103). According to D'Olimpio, if such dialogues are inspired by mass media, children can also "learn multiliteracy competencies" (p. 102).

[3] Though my own articulations vary due to differences in research focus—I am not specifically interested in online content though I agree it warrants conceptual attention—I too am a P4C theorist and practitioner who blends ideas from moral, aesthetic and political philosophy. Many of the frameworks that D'Olimpio uses have also influenced my own work, notably my conception of "deliberate moral imagining" as an aid to fostering responsible autonomy in youth.

Are they seeking escapism, instruction, validation, contention, insight? Is this pursuit conscious and deliberate or passive and inadvertent? It seems that almost regardless of the ethical status of the reasons chosen, if these are overly homogeneous in kind, critical perspectivism could become a necessary aid in bringing to light their limitations so as to expand the scope of content to which someone exposes themselves, assuming conditions of democracy and relative autonomy. In doing so, pedagogically speaking, this concept relies heavily on philosophical strategies: D'Olimpio contends that "[b]y educating students to be critical, the study of philosophy can be used to refine and habituate cognitive skills that are sorely needed in today's technological society" (p. 103). The habituation is difficult in part because a person's reasons for engaging in content tend not to be explicit to them unless they think about their thinking: a metacognitive intervention that philosophy is particularly adept at supporting, especially through a collaborative practice like P4C that distributes the efforts among community members.

On a more societal level, D'Olimpio's discussion of tribalism in mass media underlines the potential power of philosophy to inspire more compassionate reasoning in public discourse. By weaving in the subtleties inherent in aesthetic and ethical judgments—notably in her chapter on critical engagement and art—D'Olimpio epitomises the work that philosophy is uniquely positioned to do. That is, beyond helping to describe the world through concepts that name complex phenomena, it affords a normative, even prescriptive lens on situations that are nuanced, value-laden and steeped in ambiguity. In addition to modelling this orientation, by detailing interventions varying from classroom P4C sessions to public philosophical cafés, D'Olimpio not only literally describes but also prescribes a role for philosophy beyond the academy. This appeal is especially pertinent and persuasive in her advocating for philosophers as public intellectuals being "able to offer an example of what critical perspective *looks like in practice*" (p. 112), provided they themselves are "encouraging compassionate engagement with others while also critically assessing diverse ideas" (p. 102). Given this arena is often monopolised by overly scientistic claims disparaging the worthiness of philosophy, the prospect of public philosophers diversifying such perspectives seems particularly viable. Citizens could learn from those who model careful thinking and manage competing considerations in their engagement with content through the articulating and weighing of reasons. In short, by leaning on philosophical strategies to help people determine their reasons for consuming content—and developing metacognitive awareness in their interaction with said content—critical perspectivism could improve mass media spectatorship and, as D'Olimpio hopes, even strengthen global citizenship.[4]

The Who of Critical Perspectivism: Minimum Thresholds

While the value of philosophy in creating a more ethical attitude to mass media seems a promising proposition, the 'who' of critical perspectivism is a little vaguer. It is not always clear to whom the 'we' in D'Olimpio's argument refers: the general population who interacts online or the specific subset

[4] According to D'Olimpio, "The global citizen necessarily adopts the attitude of critical perspectivism….desir[ing] a world that is shared, sustainable, and that supports peaceful coexistence—although they know that this is not an easy thing to achieve" (p. 119).

concerned with how to improve the navigation of such online environments. If the latter, does the 'we' presuppose an in-group of readers who are in-the-know? Those who have figured out how to apply the concepts and strategies she is proposing? Returning to the airplane scenario, is there a distinction between my neighbours as consumers of their chosen content and myself ensconced in mine? If so, how can we tell? How do factors as potentially myriad as privilege, access, apathy, ignorance and indoctrination, affect the person who could (or even should) benefit from critical perspectivism?

While it is clear that D'Olimpio's account is not elitist—she makes numerous cases for critical perspectivism extending to minority groups and marginalised voices—it might be unwittingly exclusionary in its requirements at the contextual and individual levels.[5] For starters, the success of critical perspectivism depends on circumstances not getting in its way: if a person has little to no choice over the content they consume because of subjugating or domineering conditions, they may face a tougher path toward the rational compassion endorsed in the book. While D'Olimpio connects her claims to some democratic principles, it remains uncertain whether someone can become critically perspectival in their absence. Further, D'Olimpio concedes that her account may appear intellectually demanding—especially when applied to online environments that involve so much information processing—but she seems confident that with practice, critical perspectivism can become a habit. Yet, can *anyone* develop this attitude? Or is a certain psychological balance necessary, one free of excessive stress or trauma, for instance? Is a quality of self-perception needed, whereby a person sees themselves as sufficiently intelligent and able to actualise critical perspectivism, without a feeling of imposter syndrome undermining their efforts? Conversely, could a lack of epistemological humility delude a person into thinking they are practising critical perspectivism when they are in fact doing the opposite? More controversially still, does critical perspectivism assume specific skills or intelligences that might complicate the efforts of neurodiverse or sensorially sensitive individuals?

In thinking of the "who" of critical perspectivism, the question becomes: Is there a minimal threshold that a person must reach before they can be considered capable of reliably and consistently embodying a critically perspectival attitude? If so, should the evaluation criteria above this threshold be less exacting for those living under dictatorship or amidst heavy censorship or with specific exceptionalities? And what about those morally ambivalent cases of individuals who lurk around the boundary of what we might call a minimally critically perspectival attitude, not only in their consumption of mass media but also in their contribution to it? For example, if we imagine the stereotypical internet troll becoming *a bit more* aware of his inflammatory speech, *a bit more* discerning in his selection of sources, and *a bit more* compassionate in his online exchanges, is this improvement sufficient to count him among the critically perspectival? Put another way, is "at least a bit better" good enough?

At first glance, the answer seems to be no, at least in the sense that the minor improvement may be welcome but only as a provocation or incentive for further progress toward greater critical and compassionate engagement beyond the threshold. Otherwise, the consequence might be that users who

[5] D'Olimpio argues that "it is vital to attend to the various experiences of members of minority groups and particularly of groups that have been historically subjugated and discriminated against. Members of majority groups must work harder than anyone else to employ the compassionate mode of attention that seeks out and engages with stories and perspectives that are different to their own" (p. 31).

have become marginally less troll-like are excused for their attempts at good behaviour. While a test or certification in critical perspectivism would be beside the point, some evaluative criteria could help ensure the concept is both inclusive and achievable—while not overly accommodating— especially for those who might appear to need it most. This might be a promising extension to D'Olimpio's theory, not least because of her interest in teaching children to be critical perspectivists among widespread adultist conceptions that suggest such practices might be inappropriate or unfeasible for younger minds.

The How of Critical Perspectivism: Timing Implications

Moving on to the 'how' dimension, the notion of time operating behind the scenes of D'Olimpio's proposal is among the most interesting and difficult elements of her argument. In many of her descriptions of critical perspectivism throughout the book, she alludes to a person taking their time when enacting this attitude:

> One who adopts a critically perspective attitude will necessarily *slow down* and consider how and why they are using social media…[they] will *pause* and reflect on what they are doing prior to engaging with online games, fads, or dubious apps that appeal to base emotions such as envy or greed…The attitude of critical perspectivism is asking us to be more critically engaged with the information we receive, and to *pause* before unthinkingly basing a decision on what we have been told, or routinely forwarding misinformation or unethical (vicious) messages" (pp. 104; 86; 29, emphasis added).

The heartening implication here is that, with the right use of time, a critically perspectival attitude is indeed possible. But is timing everything? While the issue is clearly not that simple, it merits some analysis in terms of relations and access to time.

First, D'Olimpio claims that although the rise of multiliteracies is evidence of literacy reinventing itself, the critical thinking skills required to address them remain the same (p. 9). And yet this tension might well be the problem: these very multiliteracies—especially in online settings—have become necessary because communication technologies have drastically affected people's relation to time, prioritising expedience and haste at the expense of the pausing and slowing down that critical perspectivism seems to not only encourage but require. The current reality of many online exchanges demands the ability to process information quickly so as to analyse it with the same efficiency and react in a timely way through a post or comment, often with added pressures of concision given limited character counts. A person might have a great capacity for critical perspectivism when not forced to mind the clock, but otherwise lack the speed and succinctness for careful online interactions, to say nothing of the wit, provocative style, cultural savvy, and design chops that seem to characterise, say, successful online influencers. Unless and until critical perspectivists *en masse* transform the time dimension of the Web 2.0 experience, convincing and training people to pause and reflect might present a considerable challenge.

Second, even if such slowing down could be mastered, an increase in time may not suffice if a person's conceptual resources are sparse. No matter their willingness to embody rational compassion and generously commit hours to its habit formation, if a person lacks the relevant knowledge to accompany the procedures of critical perspectivism, it is unclear whether their analysis and contribution

of online content will improve in the ways D'Olimpio envisions. This introduces the possible need for moral and pedagogical pluralism as allies in the teaching of critical perspectivism. For instance, the P4C model tends to be described as a Socratic approach because it strives to be procedurally strong but relatively content neutral: it emphasises the processes of philosophical inquiry, leaving the ideas up to the community members to generate and evaluate. As P4C theorist Maughn Gregory (2015) has observed, there may be an interesting (perhaps insurmountable) tension if such a model is complemented by a critical pedagogy practice that explicitly seeks to raise consciousness about certain realities being fundamentally, and even incontrovertibly, unjust. Perhaps the well-meaning critical perspectivist needs more conceptual resources—from revisionist history to queer theory to indigenous ecology, to name but a few—to enrich the mental repertoire from which they draw when considering and constructing these so-called critical and compassionate perspectives. If so, not only might a person benefit from taking the time to pause and reflect, but they may also gain from slowing down to learn from pedagogies that judiciously (if not impartially) offer content to fuel the processes of critical perspectivism.

This timing dimension is all the more relevant—though no less difficult—when considering young people who are learning to navigate the world of adults, as they are also beginning to apprehend their own social status (as vulnerable, privileged, marginalised, etc.). Though time-consuming, a pluralist ethical and pedagogical approach that includes critical perspectivism might help them to not only consume and create content more responsibly, but also to apply a self-corrective lens on themselves. How (in)significant are they taking their views, narratives, and preferences to be in the online rough-and-tumble of ingest-react-share? What are they reinforcing by prioritising certain voices or agendas? Do these choices conflict with what D'Olimpio depicts as a "desire to seek out, recognise and listen to minority and marginalised voices?" (p. 30). In the context of childhood, then, the timeliness of such training and knowledge acquisition may be a key factor in determining the kind of media consumers and creators that young people grow up to be.

In all, D'Olimpio's incisive account of critical perspectivism raises as many questions as it does possibilities regarding the important but difficult task of equipping citizens with tools to enable a more critical and compassionate engagement with the countless perspectives they encounter daily—both on and offline in mass art and media. It stands to reason that the ethical attitude she proposes may indeed be a necessary though not sufficient part of the multiliteracies puzzle, especially if issues around inclusion, achievability and timing can be clarified. As D'Olimpio's work both indirectly and directly suggests, it is high time that philosophy be considered for the contributions it can make in this regard.

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