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Robert Cortes

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## Book review by Robert Z. Cortes

**Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age**, by Clifford G. Christians, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 428 pages pp. \$30.48 (paperback), ISBN-10: 1316606392

Any serious conversation on the necessity of universal norms in media ethics necessarily includes the name of Clifford Christians. “Necessarily” because Christians was at the inception of this conversation. Indeed, he is considered one of its “precursors” (Couldry, Madianou, and Pinchevski 2013, 3) and began to make an appeal for “normative approaches to media ethics” as early as 1979 (Craig and Ferré 2006, 123). The book *Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age* (henceforth “Media Ethics”) puts between two covers all the ideas on media ethics, communication theory and the philosophy of technology that Christians has matured throughout an impressive lifetime career “championing the plausibility of norms within a common ethics of communication acceptable across cultures” (Cortes 2019, 32).

It is not insignificant that despite Christians’s prominent position in his field, and despite having written a boatload of material on media ethics in his forty years of scholarship, “Media Ethics” is his first and (so far) only solo-authored book. Since 1977 he has been hinting at working on a media ethics theory from the ground up. Finally, in this book he confidently presents “a new theory of communication ethics that is international, multicultural, and gender inclusive” (Christians 2019, 22). But “in (his) characteristic humility” (Babbili 2008) Christians did not explicitly state the fact of his authorship. Instead, he claimed it by publishing this book with him as its sole author, thereby fulfilling the requirement of what I likewise affirm as Christians’s characteristic intellectual honesty.

Christians’s newest book has six chapters that reflect the two main proposals of his “Media Ethics Theory of Global Justice.” The first of these is the view that “technologies are not

neutral but value laden” (Christians 2019, 21). For this reason, Christians affirms, technology must be included within the ethical calculus, lest in not doing so “one unwittingly lays down the conditions for (oneself to consider) technology as an idol, and / or vice-versa” (Cortes 2019, 270). This is the “philosophy of technology” component of the theory. The second proposal offers “sacredness of life” and its corollary principles of truth, human dignity, non-violence and cosmopolitan justice as globally acceptable standards for media ethics. These principles, which Christians calls “proto-norms,” were derived from an original research he did with Fr. Michael Traber, SMB and his reflections on the philosophy of language (Cortes 2019; 2016). This is the “ethics of being” component of the theory.

As all good theories go, these two proposals feed into each other and find their way into each other’s discussions. For example, Christians discusses in Chapter 1 the “instrumentalist view” that treats technology as a “mere instrument,” the blame for which he lays squarely on Aristotle’s shoulders. Christians considers this view as “naïve” and the main contributor to a “technicistic society” (Christians 1986, 200), as well as a key pillar of “technocratic culture” (Christians 2019, 48). Hinting at the solution to this “technological problem” quite early on, in the same chapter he brings up the concepts of truth (54) and reverence for life (75) as he discusses a “human-centered” approach to technology, using primarily the framework of Martin Heidegger as his philosophical buttress against Aristotle.

Conversely, even as Chapters 2 – 6 are dedicated mainly to the principles of his “ethics of being,” Christians consistently points out each principle’s interaction with technology as he moves from one chapter to the next. For instance, in Chapter 2 he proposes using “community as a normative ideal” in media ethics to obviate the evils of a “technological regime” (Christians 2019, 115). In his discussion on the “ethics of truth” in Chapter 3, he critically points out how

technology has been allowed to “determine news” and “(define) what is newsworthy” (178). In chapter 4, Christians demonstrates that the relationship between technology and the human does not have to be always prejudicial. Using specific examples from Africa and South America, he affirms that through the “ethics of human dignity” media technologies could be “convivial tools” (211) that strengthen bonds of community. He explores the “ethics of nonviolence” in Chapter 5 vis-à-vis technology in the context of entertainment, hate speech and peace journalism. Lastly, in Chapter 6, he affirms the centrality of “the role of digital media in social movements for justice” (316).

Media scholars who have read at least part of Christians’s voluminous written corpus will find many of the ideas in this book already quite familiar. This is neither surprising nor strange. This book, after all, is presumably his *magnum opus*, a sort of final work in which he articulates in already almost definitive fashion the theory he had been referring to since 1977, when he suggested “a theoretical construction” that he was going to build “from the ground up” (Cortes 2019, 38). Though already extensively tackled in several written works, the topics take on a fresh voice now as they re-appear integrated into a thoroughly articulated, original media ethics theory. The freshness is enhanced by Christians’s discussion of how his theory applies to AI, robotics, and other new generations technologies (Christians 2019, 83). He likewise adds to an already mind-boggling list of bibliographical references.

It is to the credit of Clifford G. Christians that he has bucked the opinion of Ladikas and Schroeder (2005) that “the attainment of a truly global ethics is a task for future generations” (413). In finally publishing *Media Ethics*, Christians has provided written proof, in a manner of speaking, to the contrary. There lies the main merit of this book. It is, as it were, the final articulation of Christians’s reply to the “huge challenge (of) amorality” which, in his view, is

“the biggest challenge for communication ethics for future generations” (Christians 2007, 96). Moreover, this book is the culmination of Christians’s project of taking ethical theory in a heroic direction, i.e., away from its consequentialist and relativist versions that have become default worldviews of “modern men and women, borne as they are by a cynicism and skepticism over the viability of universal ethical norms” (Cortes 2019, 306). This fact is key because according to one ethics scholar Christians’s is “the only voice out of the choir of professional ethics in communication who is not a proportionalist, consequentialist..., or at least...tries not to be so” (N. González Gaitano, email attachment to author, May 15, 2019).

Christians’s media ethical theory is genuinely interesting and promising because he takes as the basic presupposition for it one that is in harmony with his Christian worldview: human beings as “holistic humans” (Christians 2019, 105). Its main elements include the sacredness of life, truth, and other human realities that speak both intuitively and rationally to the human core. Through this more “realist” approach, he is able to circumvent the vices of “universal ethical principles in the past (that) have proved to be oppressive... typically... designed from a certain perspective – Western, male, modernist, for example – and then imposed on others in a patronizing manner” (Christians 2019, 20). His complementary use of the original research he did with Traber and of the philosophy of language renders him intellectually credible in a secular field. Moreover, his inclusion of technology within his framework contributes to the theory’s originality and renders it more complete, as media ethics theories go, for the present cybernetic age.

The key question, of course, is whether Christians’s media ethics theory, taken as it is, effectively addresses the “increasing amorality of our technological order” (Christians 2007, 97). Having studied Christians’s theory using the voluminous amount of material he has written on

media ethics – this book included – my initial assessment is a rather cautious one. I can confidently affirm that the theory articulated in this book is in a good position to be considered “a plausible globally normative ethic” (Cortes 2019, 306) from the perspective of its final proposals or conclusions. Yet from the point of view of its philosophical foundations or premises, I have some reservations.

The first issue concerns the ontological foundation that he posits for “sacredness of life.” Upon closer examination the reader might, like me, find it rather generic and, consequently, weak in addressing the problem of relativism. Christians’s proposal in his theory for getting rid of relativism resorts to what appears to be only intellectual hairsplitting between traditionally inseparable concepts. As in his more recent works (e.g. Christians 2009), in this book he insists on making a distinction between “cultural” and “moral” relativism (Christians 2019, 236), contrary to the affirmations of the culturalist tradition itself (Jarvie 2007, 554). He then appears to surrender to relativism by suggesting the acceptance of “one sense” of cultural relativism. In a past work, he suggested this “sense” to be only the “epistemological” while simultaneously affirming that “moral relativism (be) rejected at the same time” (Christians 2009, 288). As a victory over relativism, this unnecessarily complicated line of argument is dubious and hardly convincing.

Why did Christians resort to this rather tortured approach? It appears to me that it is because he had decided from the get-go to pass over the notions of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence properly understood in their non-Cartesian sense, concepts quite crucial and effective in confronting relativism. But why does he do this? In his previous writings it is obvious that Christians was very critical towards these concepts because he understood them only in their positivist subversions (e.g., see Christians 2003; 2005; 2008; 2009). In this book, he

is ostensibly less hostile and much more open to them than in his previous writings by admitting of possible nuances (e.g., see Christians 2019, 126-127, 149-151, etc.). Yet the apparent suspicion and consequent cautiousness remain and are seen in several parts (e.g., see 110, 138-139, 272, etc.). They echo a relatively recent interview in which he asserts that “our ethics needs a rational component, but it can’t be individuated rationality” (Cortes 2016, 148).

Christians’s lukewarmness towards these classical concepts that have their origin in Aristotle brings me to the second issue I have with the theory. I refer to a certain degree of incoherence in some of its parts. For instance, like Couldry (2006) and Plaisance (2013), I have seen through Christians’s ostensible reliance on these Aristotelian concepts in many of his works, albeit used with a different nuance. Still, it does seem odd to me that he should favor a more difficult yet doubtful approach when the proper use of these classical concepts would have been simpler and more effective.

The coherence of his theory likewise weakens with his insistence that the “community is axiologically and ontologically prior to persons” (Christians 2019, 109). Firstly, this community-person framework is in conflict with his own concept of communitarianism and contradicts, as it were, his own standards for his “humancentric” ethical theory such as rejecting the instrumentalization of the human person (Cortes 2019, 220). Secondly, this articulation of community vis-à-vis the person has been identified with that sort of totalitarianism that Christians (2011, 29) himself has expressly rejected for any concept in his theory. Thirdly, this affirmation weakens his “proto-norms” given the innumerable abuses that have been committed against human persons and their legitimate rights in the name of “community.”

These issues, however, are readily remediable. In my study of Christians’s ethics (Cortes 2019) I elaborated on an enhanced paradigm of Aristotelian concepts and proposed an

articulation of the link between person and community that better captures their true relationship, that of “the community (being) axiologically and ontologically attuned to persons” (218). If Christians is open to admitting these recommendations into his theory, he would find that these elements strengthen his theory more robustly against relativism and ensconce it more securely within an enriched human-centeredness. Indeed, my proposals are my personal response to a call that Christians (1989) made to the “stouthearted” decades ago to work “the philosophical trenches” (4). I interpret that as an invitation to critique and strengthen his promising theory. With this book review as a springboard, I can only imagine a lively continuation of a colloquy with Clifford Christians on communication ethics (Cortes 2016) that I began with him four years ago.

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