A critical evaluation of Clifford Christians’s media ethics theory: a précis

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ABSTRACT
Clifford Christians, a leading authority in media ethics, first proposed the idea of constructing a new ethical theory for the field as early as 1977. Since then, Christians has produced a prodigious amount of scholarly work, proposing and developing concepts that were to form part of his theory. In 2019, in the book Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age, he synthesized the ideas that he had been developing throughout his productive career. In this article the author uses primarily a selection of Christians’s work from 1977 to 2017. He first identifies the elements of the theory, then offers a critical evaluation of the theory’s plausibility as a globally normative media ethics based on Christians’s claims. He affirms the theory’s promising position to be so ‘from the perspective of its final proposals or conclusions’ yet points out the theory’s difficulties ‘from the point of view of its philosophical foundations or premises’. He concludes by offering concrete suggestions in harmony with the framework of Clifford Christians, that can serve as directions for future research that would help to settle the theory more securely within an enhanced human-centeredness while rendering it less susceptible to relativism.

Introduction: the significance of Clifford Christians

The project of formulating universal norms in communication and media ethics arguably began with Clifford Christians. As early as 1979, when media ethics was tied to parochial codes Christians was already making an appeal for ‘normative approaches to media ethics’ (Craig and Ferré 2006, 123). He is thus deservedly considered one of the field’s ‘precursors’ (Couldry, Madianou, and Pinchevski 2013, 3). He has spent an entire academic career championing the plausibility of norms within a common ethics of communication acceptable across cultures and has proposed a viable solution to the problems posited by ethical normativity’s critics. After he and Michael Traber came up with the term ‘protonorm’ (Cortes 2016, 147–148) and formally suggested it in 1997
a good number of scholars have come to accept this original concept, grounded in our humanness, as a plausible basis for a universalizable communication ethics (Englehardt 1998; Kitross 2000; Baker 2009; Phillip Lee 2011; Arnett 2013; Caldwell 2014).

Beyond his assertion of normativity’s imperative in media ethics, Clifford Christians’s authority in the field comes from being a ‘prophetic voice’ at the time when society has before it an ‘immense challenge and opportunity in the technical realm’ (Healey 2010, 134). Crucial to this ‘prophetic’ critique of mass media (121) is his proposal to treat technology as more than a mere instrument, and for that matter, as something that ought to be taken more seriously in ethical analysis (Gladney 1994; Stout and Buddenbaum 2002; Omachonu and Healey 2009; German 2011).

This ‘prophetic voice’ of Christians, however, goes beyond the content of his theory to the way that he does his theorizing, which makes Christians stand out as a scholar. Cooper (2010) affirms that ‘it is impossible to divide his theory from his practice and to separate his teaching, or if you will his prophecy, from his daily living’ (106). This means that Christians doesn’t put his faith aside ‘on entering a university, a professional association, a cultural society …like a man leaving his hat at the door’ (Escrivá 2002, #353). This transparent connection between professional life and faith shone in one interview when he said, ‘My colleagues here know me as a Christian, and that’s one advantage of being here long enough. You sort of earn your credibility through your work and they at least understand your perspective’ (Cortes 2016, 139).

Key to that remark is his reference to the credence he has merited among his colleagues by means of his work; that is, not through, and perhaps in spite of, his Christian faith. It signifies that for him professional life and faith and teaching and daily living are neither to be conflated nor confused. This point is crucial above all in order to fully understand Clifford G. Christians and his works as a ‘legacy of …indispensable scholarship’ (Plaisance 2011, 108). As well, this point needs to be kept in mind especially in contexts such as that of an address he made at Pepperdine University² during which, in his own words, ‘I was explicit about my faith commitment’ (Cortes 2016, 141). Among others, he said, ‘I am called to live distinctively as God’s agent here, and therefore, the centerpiece of my vocation is ideas…’ (Christians 2002b).

For most scholars, the upshot of such candidness in one’s faith commitment in the context of their scholarship might have been, according to Marsden (1997), ‘viewed with puzzlement or even consternation’ (13) within the university or academic setting (Marsden 1997; Yancey 2015). In the case of Clifford G. Christians, however, the opposite is true. Among his professional colleagues Christians is seen as not just one intellectual ‘among the giants of media ethics’ (Meyers 2010, 87) but rather the one scholar who might be considered ‘arguably the standard bearer of media ethics’ (Arnett 2013, 58). This reputation comes as much from being open and consistent about his Christian worldview as from his open and pluralistic approach to ethical theory building.

Clifford Christians believes that the best chance of helping media ‘to move all those universal truths off the mental shelf and into journalism’s gatekeeping process’ would be ‘consensus development of a set of normative ethics’ (Schulman 1986, 29). Thus,
very early on he proposed building a universal normative theory of media ethics ‘from the ground up,’ based on culture understood as ‘realities… inherited and built from symbols which shape our action, identity, thoughts, and sentiment’ (Christians 1977, 11, 13): values, in short. To ward off insinuations of relativism, however, he issues a quick rejoinder in which he rejects the idea ‘that Reality as a whole is inherently non-structural until it is shaped by human symbols. Man’s creative ability works within the limits of God’s design as Creator’ (14). Thus, Christians’s approach seems to be a via media that takes seriously the human being’s complex subjectivity and the fact of man being both a communicative and creative being, as well as the fact of reality existing independently from the human mind and will.

Yet Christians (2011b) has likened the immense difficulty involved in the project as ‘more like chasing fool’s gold than anything else…’ (735). Contributing in large part to the enormous difficulty is the fact that values and culture—the starting point of Christians’s theory building—are ideas which have been claimed or affirmed as relative (hence, shifting and temporary) in the history of thought. Christians himself is evidently aware of how tenuous this approach is and has conceded that ‘this foundation, however, is tentative’ (Christians, Fackler, and Ferré 1993, 54). Indeed, the challenge of crafting a globally acceptable ethics has always been to ‘heroically and often skillfully attempt to maneuver in the muddy waters between the Scylla of nihilistic cultural relativism and the Charybdis of supremacist universalism’ (Eriksen 2001, 127). Using the ‘from the ground up’ approach, he has decisively steered clear of the latter. The challenge for his theory, however, still remains that of avoiding the threat of moral relativism while at the same time not falling into the trap of achieving global ‘community via ethical minimalism’ (Robertson 2001, 661).

The media ethics theory of Clifford Christians

Until some months ago, what would have been apparent in all the published literature that could be examined so far by and on Clifford G. Christians was that he had not explicitly claimed ownership of a new theory of communication and mass media ethics. One of his collaborators would attribute this to Christians’s ‘characteristic humility’ (Babbili 2008). However, if Christians is not a thinker who has already exclaimed ‘Eureka!’ for a newly found media ethics theory, he gives a strong impression as being one who has spent an entire career searching for and working on such a theory. Since 1977 he has been suggesting working on a media ethics theory from the ground up (Christians 1977, 11, 1989a, 123, 2010b, 143). In his most recent work, he still appears to only hint that he has authored a new media ethics theory—but now, more directly. Christians (2019) does this by referring to ‘constituents of the new theory of communication ethics developed here (in this book)’ (74). A Chinese professor with formidable credentials then reinforces this subtle claim in the Afterword of the same book by affirming that Christians ‘expounds a theoretical paradigm… which endows the classical principles of ethics with new meanings… and… restructures theory toward an ontological theory of international communication ethics’ (Chen 2019, 335).
The long and the short of it

In his latest opus, Christians (2019) often refers to his theory as a ‘media ethics of global justice’ (29, 30, 80). For those interested in brevity—imaginably the journalists and media professionals with no patience for long academic texts—the theory could be summarized through six ‘elements.’ Two of these can be called the theory’s ‘components,’ while the other four its ‘attributes.’ The former consists of the following main (rather dense) proposals:

1. ‘Sacredness of life’ and its corollary principles of truth, human dignity, non-violence and cosmopolitan justice as universal standards for an international media ethics; and
2. A view of technology as not a mere or neutral instrument, but rather as reality more intricately woven into man’s Being.

The first proposal is that ‘component’ of his theory that Christians refers to as the ‘ethics of Being,’ whereas the second proposal is his ‘philosophy of technology.’ Each of these components is explained in separate sub-sections below.

Attributes of the theory

Aside from its ‘components,’ in order to fully appreciate Christians’s theory, one ought to consider as well as its ‘attributes,’ i.e., the characteristics that stand out the most in his theory. These are considered part of the theory’s elements because, in fact, these attributes help us understand more deeply the theory’s components. Specifically, only when one understands that Christians’s theory is (1) anti-Enlightenment (Christians 2000a, 16–21, 2004a, 41–43), (2) Counter-Enlightenment-inspired (Christians 2008c, 2009, 2015c); (3) communitarian (Cortes 2016, 145); and (4) triadic (Christians 2014a), would one fully appreciate Christians’s ethics of being and his philosophy of technology.

Anti-enlightenment driven

Since the 1970s to the present Christians has been consistent in criticizing rationalist assumptions and Enlightenment-hand-me-down postulates that have not only dominated but, more seriously, undergirded the field of mass communication since the foundations of ethics in the 1890s down to our highly technological age (Christians 2000a, 16–21, 2004a, 41–43).

On the one hand, he asserts that Cartesian rationalism, which puts absolute trust in human reason alone, cannot be a source of ‘reliable knowledge for living well’ (Christians 2015c, 39), and that Mill’s utilitarian criterion is inadequate in dealing with several very crucial issues faced by media today (Christians 2007d, 120). These approaches promote ‘monologic’ rather than the dialogic ethics5 (Christians 2007d, 123) that communication ethics ought to be. On the other hand, he rejects Nietzsche’s godless order and its consequent relativism since these paradigms can neither uphold human personhood nor hold any society together (Christians 1977, 18, 2009, 277). Moreover, he sees relativism an intellectually unsustainable philosophical worldview,
suffering as it does from an internal contradiction as expressed by Mannheim’s paradox (Christians 1989a, 126, 1989b, 5, 2005a, 6, 2009, 287). That Christians’s theory claims to challenge all these ‘essential’ and quasi-dogmatic premises in media ethics is why it is, in a sense, novel.

It must be mentioned, however, that Christians (2000a) considers relativism simply as a defiant response to rationalism in what is an apparently dichotomous ‘rationalism versus relativism’ (33) frame. In reality, and more importantly, relativism is rationalism’s direct descendant and its necessary effect. Since Descartes moved reality’s home from outside the self to inside of it, his rationalism unwittingly set up the eventual framework for the birth of subjectivism and the thriving of relativism. No wonder one of Karl Popper’s disciples would remark, ‘The deep error behind relativism … is a passive and individualistic view of human rationality’ (Jarvie 1983, 45).

Counter-enlightenment inspired
Clifford Christians’s solution to the problem wrought by the Enlightenment in media ethics has sources in the Counter-Enlightenment (Christians 2008d, 2009, 2015c). As such, he has a rather straightforward equation: if ‘the issue of ethics and media theory has its roots in the Enlightenment’ then the solutions would be ‘counter-Enlightenment initiatives that integrate ethics into theory (such as now) occurring in social responsibility theory, cultural studies, and sociological propaganda’ (Christians 2014b, 225). To illustrate the wisdom of the formula he affirms that ‘journalists trained in counter-Enlightenment research identify with social meanings in their role as participants and formulate seminal conclusions about them as observers’ (Christians, Fackler, and Ferré 1993, 121). For Christians (2015b) once media and communication professionals imbibe the ‘Counter-Enlightenment’s holistic understanding of our humanness’ (43) then the ‘two problems in media ethics … formal rules and ethical models built on the abstracted self’ will have been overcome and ‘multiculturalism (will) flourish’ (36).

However, the history of philosophy has demonstrated that the Counter-Enlightenment ‘always ran the risk of encouraging’ relativism and, when it did, had ‘no resources to quell (it)’ (Lilla 2003, 10). This is not surprising since, as Pocock (2004) had already hinted, the Counter-Enlightenment was nothing but one Enlightenment in conflict with another within the same intellectual universe. In the analogy of Tallis (1997), the Counter-Enlightenment is Enlightenment’s child who ‘tends to bite the hands that feed it’ (204). Rosen (2002) draws an even more picturesque analogy as he draws our attention to one thinker notorious for his rejection of ‘rationalism and so to an excessive praise of passions and emotions.’ This is Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘a great son of the Enlightenment who sees the faults of his father with special clarity, but who is himself finally brought down by his genetic destiny’ (11). More to the point, the susceptibility of Counter-Enlightenment proposals to lead to relativism and skepticism is a clue that these proposals have not escaped the Cartesian rationalistic system. For this reason, a theory as that of Christians, which seeks to reject relativism and rationalism, would need to reconsider this intellectual tradition as the source of its framework.
Communitarian in scope

Christians presents ‘communitarian ethics’ as a more comprehensive alternative ethical framework to what he refers to as ‘mainstream ethics’—virtue ethics, utilitarian ethics, and duty ethics—which ‘make individual choice and accountability their centerpiece’ and are all ‘Eurocentric.’ Since, according to its proponents, the basis of communitarian ethics is human relationships, it ought to ‘ring true both North and South, and in Western and Eastern cultures… (to meet) the most stringent tests of non-parochialism’ (Christians, Fackler, and Ferré 2012, xvi). Considering the global scope of the field of communications and media Christians believes that the communitarian approach to ethics is the best course of action.

In an interview, he was asked about ‘the trajectory of (communitarianism) in terms of its development to its present articulation … (and) what direction… this concept was developing’ (Cortes 2016, 145). Hinting at how he has continued to refine this idea throughout his career Christians reveals that while working on one collaborative project, he decided to abandon the term which he already found ‘a bit too narrow.’ He now prefers the term ‘communitas, in the tradition of Western philosophy.’ The project began years previously as ‘a challenge from South Africa’ which has its own concept of communitarianism called ubuntu. Working on that project Christians realized that ‘to use terms like communal, or communitas, is better than ‘communitarianism’ because the latter still has this American context in which it emerged politically’ (146). In considering an extra-American context, Christians echoes one of his inspirations in the philosophy of language, Paul Ricoeur, who said that ‘communitarianism is… mainly used in the Anglo-Saxon context’ (Tóth 1999, 6) and reflects his strong commitment to making his media ethics theory transnational and multicultural.

Triadic in approach

Clifford Christians approaches the construction of his theory in an explicitly ‘triangular’ manner. This means, firstly, that he is positioning his own media ethics theory in the tradition of ‘triadic’ communication theories that have appeared throughout history (Christians 2014a) instead of dyadic transmission models of communication, which are possibly the most widely known in the discipline (Chang 2009). Whereas dyadic formulae require only the elements of sender-receiver and message, triadic theories require, in addition, the actual contexts in which human agents find themselves—contexts such as technologies, the physical environment, and their professional practice (Christians 2019). Christians, by design, has incorporated into his media ethics theory a ‘human-centered’ philosophy of technology that takes into account the nature of modern media technologies. Having thus equipped his media ethics theory, he is convinced that it promises to offer an intrinsically more global understanding of media (Christians et al. 2008).

The other instance of this triangular approach to theory-building in Christians is seen in his development—together with colleagues from different parts of the world—of an ethical theory that consists of ‘three levels that interact dynamically in ethical experience—the levels of presupposition, principle, and precept.’ These concepts have an interesting history and a meaning in Christians’s theory deeper than their quotidian usage, but these can be described here very briefly. By ‘presupposition’ Christians
basically means one’s worldview. Not surprisingly, the basic presupposition that he holds in his media ethics theory is one that is quite in harmony with his theism: the view of human beings as ‘holistic humans’ (Christians 2019; Christians et al. 2008, 146). By ‘principle’ he means a universal ‘controlling norm’ or ‘master value’ to which further norms would be answerable, or one which other values reflect or are derived from. In Christians’s theory, this is the sacredness of human life (Christians 2019, 74).

Lastly, ‘precepts’ are his ‘operating principles,’ the ‘more concrete’ element of the three concepts in this triad and, as it were, gives a ‘more specific, practical resolution’ to the first two concepts. These are human dignity, truth telling, and nonviolence. He avers that this ‘tri-level’ theory is dynamic enough to be ‘compatible, in principle, with the fact of change in our ethical values across time and culture’ (Christians et al. 2008, 138, 151). Presumably, Christians’s own ‘ethics of universal being’ (136), which recognizes the necessity of both universality and respect for diversity in a normative global media ethics, and likewise subsumes the three levels just described, fits into this triangular framework.

**Components of the theory**

In developing a communication and media ethics for the twenty-first century, Christians (2019) is only too aware that the real order of the day is addressing the challenges posed by the ‘current digital era of networking, search engines, computer databases, online and cyberspace’ (7). These technologies have enabled previously unthinkable yet now standard instantaneous communication among transnational audiences that is impossible to regulate by nationally bound codes of media ethics. It is for this reason that he incorporates into his ethical theory both an explicit philosophy of technology and an ethical framework that is ‘viable transnationally’ (74). For the latter, he is convinced that such a framework ought to be ‘constitutive of our humanness,’ i.e. ‘an ontological ethics, an ethics of being that affirms reverence for life on earth as the rationale for ethical decision making’ (75).

**Ethics of being**

When Clifford Christians classifies his media ethics theory as an ‘ethics of being,’ he means that it is one that is founded not on ‘a truncated notion of humans as (mere) rational individuals’—another apparent swipe at Cartesian rationalism and utilitarian individualism—but rather on Being, by which he means ‘the holistic notion of humans as humans-in-relation’ (Christians 2008d, 7). As well, it is a reference to his communitarian paradigm.

His ‘ethics of being’ affirms the ‘sacredness of life as the supreme universal’ (i.e., the principle) and entails basic principles ‘that are grounded in our common humanity—truth, human dignity, non-violence.’ These three ‘operating principles’ or ‘precepts,’ interacting with each other, form Christians’s definition of the ‘cosmopolitan justice of being,’ which he proposes as the ‘normative standard’ by which media professionals and users should measure their ethics (Christians 2019). All these concepts fall under a bigger concept that is now practically identified with Clifford Christians: ‘proto-norms,’ i.e., principles that ‘lie underneath’ others (Cortes 2016).
The concept of justice is central in the media ethics of Christians. This centrality is shown, among other things, by the fact that, on at least two occasions, he conflates or replaces human dignity, one of his three basic principles, with justice (Christians 1997c, 14, 2008d, 18). He has even gone to the extent of affirming that truth, human dignity, non-violence (principles arising from his ethics of being) are a species of justice (Christians 2019). Through this he is affirming a ‘universal theory of media ethics’ while condemning the two extremes of absolutism and relativism (Christians et al. 2008) because these two philosophical approaches are not ‘ontological,’ i.e. they do not get into the universal source of ethics which is man’s being. In distinguishing ‘universal’ from ‘absolute’ and in broaching the idea of ‘being’ he doesn’t make reference to either Aristotle or Aquinas but rather to Heidegger. Consequently, Christians bases his ‘ethics of Being’ on Heideggerian philosophy and its concept of being, Dasein (Heidegger 1996).

The exploration of Dasein is beyond the scope of this article, yet potential difficulties must be mentioned for an ethics of being with the attributes that Christians describes when based on this particular concept. These arise from two issues confronting Heidegger’s philosophy of which Dasein is central. The first is Heidegger’s relativism and the second his ‘atheism … the refusal of a theological voice’ (Hemming 2002) in philosophy. As regards the former, although the jury is still out among Heidegger scholars as regards Heidegger’s relativism (in general), a good number nevertheless affirm it (Gregory 2016; Barash 2003; Margolis 1992; Apel 1992; Holtug 1992; Kockelmans 1973). As regards the latter, the issue is not ‘Heidegger’s personal faith (or personal atheism), if there is one to speak of’ (Grondin 2003), but rather his ‘methodological axiom’ of treating ‘philosophy to be of atheist character … (and) as it were, brackets the question of God’ (Vedder 2003, 137). In Heidegger’s own words, ‘faith has no room in thinking’ (Vycinas 2012, 314). C.S. Gilson (2011) affirms that Heidegger’s Dasein vis-à-vis Thomistic ‘being’ or esse are two notions distinct from and incompatible with each other. Among other reasons, Heidegger’s Dasein is the central concept of a philosophy which, according to Dillard (2011), rejects ‘the notion that the universe is created by a metaphysically independent Creator,’ and thus, ‘can be described as a kind of atheology’ (1). If this substantiated view is correct, then we are presented not only with a logical explanation and premise of Heidegger’s disputed relativism, but also with the irony that Christians’s ethics of Being is apparently based on a philosophical presupposition opposite his own, which he has affirmed clearly as not only ‘theistic’ (Christians 2010b, 148) but also ‘Christian’ (p. 147). In any case, considering all the above, one would at least raise the question whether the central concept of ‘being’ of a philosophy such as Heidegger’s—both admittedly ‘atheistic’ and suspiciously relativistic—would be the best substratum for a media ethics that aims to be as securely non-relativist and open to faith as the one of Clifford Christians.

**Philosophy of technology**

Considering that communication is now more and more inextricably linked with media technologies, Clifford Christians incorporates an explicit philosophy of technology with his ‘ethics of Being.’ Deeply influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul, he has long been convinced of technology’s tendency to intrude into the
full flourishing of the human being and get in the way of the ‘ontological and historical vocation’ of all men and women to become ‘fully human.’ This, he believes, can be achieved only through language—specifically, through dialogue—echoing Paulo Freire. (Christians 2004c, 2007c, 2011c, 2019). He thus styles his philosophy of technology as ‘human-centered’ in direct contrast to the ‘instrumentalist’ one whose origins he traces to Aristotle. As expected, he is highly critical of both instrumentalism and its originator (Christians 1997a, 68; 2000b, 80).

In the mind of Clifford Christians ‘instrumentalism’ is more nuanced than its obvious meaning, ‘technology as a mere tool.’ For Christians instrumentalism seems to mean the naïve view of technology as neutral or a mere instrument or tool, by which one unwittingly lays down the conditions for considering technology as an idol, and / or vice-versa. This nuanced meaning of instrumentalism is found in varying degrees in his writings on the philosophy of technology from 1997 onwards. For example, on the idea of deified technology as well as instrumental technology, he writes: ‘contemporary industrial culture is an instrumentalist order of amoral means and technocratic efficiency, in opposition to the religious imagination’ (Christians 1997a, 65); on neutral technology: ‘instrumentalism compels politicians and social theorists to fret over technology’s impact, but engineering efficiency is required in the laboratory’ (66–67). He later writes, ‘We ought to destroy our modern idols … demythologize today’s illusions about technological prowess … and (shatter) all divinatory claims by the technological and bureaucratic domains’ (Christians 2006, 156).

Christians appears convinced as ever of instrumentalism’s inadequacy for his media theory that aims to be applicable to a highly digital, multi-cultural international environment. His writings suggest that instrumentalism may even be the cause of the world getting all its communication ethics, and perhaps ethics itself, wrong. The reason is that, for Christians, this technological view has confined media ethics to treating technology in only one of its less important aspects, i.e. as an instrument. For him, the instrumentalist view has derailed media ethics from viewing technology more completely or more profoundly as it should be or should have been viewed. Consequently, analysis and application of all ethical action involving communication and media in this technological society would be deficient and thus, necessarily, flawed. This is why, just like his major influences in the philosophy of technology, Christians ‘challenges cultural theories of the media and mass communication to take technology seriously’ (Christians, 2014c, 527).

He thus proposes a ‘human-centered view of technology,’ by which he actually means three things. The first and most obvious sense is a view that is mindful of what technology has done and could do to humanity. Following Jacques Ellul, he is warning us not against technological products but rather against the ‘spirit of machineness,’ a ‘mystique’ that is confronting and dominating the human person—a spiritual being—who is the center of such crucial areas of human endeavors as morality, politics, culture, ethics, and education (Christians 2011b, 730, 2019). Second, by a ‘human-centered technology’ Christians means one in which ‘people and the material are intertwined’ (Christians 2010b, 152), following the lead of Martin Heidegger all the way to the German philosopher’s interpretation of the human being—which is too dense to include in this article. The third and last nuance is technology at the service of
human flourishing. It is the obvious result of the two previous nuances, the most straightforward meaning of the term, and the one that most often shines in his work. For Christians, when technology is seen as a mere instrument, the result is that machine-like efficiency becomes the most important standard of human life, and the realities that more affirm our humanity—e.g., morals, culture, relationships—take the back seat.

A critical evaluation of the media ethics theory of Clifford Christians

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). Instead, he has moved media ethics in the direction of ‘the philosophical analysis of ethical theory, the explication of moral claims and how and whether, philosophically, value choices can be defended’ (Lambeth 1988, 22). His project of ‘re-theorizing’ media ethics theory in a direction which he perceives as out of its current Enlightenment frame has been an essential force in challenging the unquestioned prominence and dominance of Enlightenment rationalism, especially its utilitarian and consequentialist versions, in media and communication ethics. At the same time, his theory also makes the brave claim of challenging relativism, a frame of mind which has become the default worldview of modern men and women—media practitioners included—borne along as they are by a cynicism and skepticism over the viability of universal ethical norms. In place of rules and codes, Christians (2008a) proposes the revival of the ‘philosophical mind,’ and suggests that ‘instead of focusing ethics too narrowly, the issues should be rooted in philosophical beliefs about the nature of human beings and the meaning of life.’

With a theoretical model that uses the concept of proto-norms to full effect, he posits as necessary ‘a worldview out of which the core of our being is coherent,’ and encourages ‘struggling with our foundational presuppositions about life’ (47). It is clear that Christians’s media ethics project has been an impetus for the entire field of communication and media ethics to explore once more the feasibility of a global normativity in media ethics. On the acceptance of this global normativity among media practitioners lies the hope of addressing the ‘huge challenge (of) amorality’ (Christians 2007a, 96) that threatens twenty-first century communications and media practitioners and students. The question now is whether Christians has been successful in this project, and to what extent, assuming the present form and content of the theory that he is proposing.

Correcting the wrongs of rationalism and relativism

Although undoubtedly also aware of the positive effects of the Enlightenment culture, Christians has consistently called out its most dominant defects in his works and has demonstrated that it is not a sustainable framework for an authentic global media ethics in a technological world. Christians understands, and has made us to understand, that for a media ethics of a sustainable sort to come about, an ethical paradigm shift must happen: it must be inclusive of other cultures and worldviews outside of the
West, must consider the human being as a holistic reality, and must take into account the more subtle and unexamined involvement of technology in ethical decisions. Moreover, by suggesting an understanding of technology beyond the merely ‘instrumental view’ (which, in his view, has been sustained by a rationalistic outlook) and by pointing towards a perspective in which technology has a direct, albeit yet incompletely understood involvement in ethical decision-making, Christians caps his thorough attempt at rectifying a media ethics that has been at the mercy of Enlightenment rationalism on the one hand, and of relativism on the other.

**Not the right ‘reason’**

In attacking the Enlightenment tradition, Christians has correctly identified its basic malaise in the area of human reason. In so doing, however, instead of recognizing the fact (and then reacting accordingly) that Enlightenment reason ‘does not express human reason in its fullness, but only a part of it’ and that ‘because it thus mutilates reason, it cannot be considered rational’ (Ratzinger 2005, 352), Christians ostensibly consigns the entire concept of reason into the hands of the Enlightenment. Consequently, in his project of ‘re-theorizing theory from the ground up’ he treats reason at best with what I call ‘effective indifference.’ What does this mean?

In Christians’s writings it is clear that two concepts of reason (or rationality) are at play—one Cartesian and another non-Cartesian—and that the latter concept is inescapable for his system to be coherent, as will be evident below. Despite these facts, Christians appears to ‘effectively’ acknowledge only the existence of the Enlightenment concept while he seems to minimize—i.e. feign indifference to—the other, more quotidian, meaning. The proof of the former is that when Christians treats reason in its Cartesian version, which he does in the great majority of his writings, ‘reason’ is vehemently attacked in unmistakable and what feels quite visceral fashion. As regards the latter, even though it is fairly obvious that one of Christians’s central concepts includes Aristotle’s *phronesis* or practical *reason* itself, and the rest require the guidance of reason to work, he uses this understanding of ‘reason’ nonchalantly, almost imperceptibly, and certainly not with the same emphasis as he does when he talks about rationality as an Enlightenment vice. Together with the concept of reason or rationality, Christians also concedes the notions of objectivity and nature-as-essence—in general, the entire metaphysical approach—to the Enlightenment (Christians 2013, 79), and has opted instead to create a system that ostensibly attempts to obviate all these concepts.

It is not clear whether Christians has chosen this path because he is convinced that these concepts are dispensable and not worth reclaiming, or rather because he perceives that, despite their importance, they are impossible to recover. At least one cannot glean which is which whenever Christians articulates his justification for avoiding these concepts such as in the following text. ‘There are major paradoxes in current theories with their linguistic turn. However, they speak in concert against foundational knowledge—against metaphysics, universal reason, ethical systems, correspondence views of truth, and essentialist theories of human nature’ (Christians, 2002c). Ironically, despite steering clear of the metaphysical concepts of reason, objectivity, and essence, which he appears to consign now to the Enlightenment tradition, he insists
that ‘rather than move uncritically from objectivity to subjectivity or from correspondence to coherence views of truth, I believe resolution emerges from philosophical anthropology’ (Christians, 2008c, 9). This statement, of course, raises the question of what sort of ‘human’ (ἀνθρωπός or anthropos in Greek) Christians is talking about in this ‘anthropology’ in which reason (of whatever sort) does not seem to have a place.

Regardless, however, of Christians’s sincere attitude towards these specified concepts, the end result of avoiding them has been to steer him into using arguments which are not only rather convoluted and confusing but also quite susceptible to relativism, and reflective of culturalism, emotionalism, and intuitionism which have all been identified as types of relativism (Baghramian and Carter, 2016). The upshot of all this is that, aside from being someone that Plaisance (2011) has pointed as one who ‘provides compelling rhetoric in the battle against moral relativism’ (p. 98), Christians has also been cited by Nikolaev (2011), ironically, as the authority to support the claim that ‘relativism seems to be the only fail-safe perspective in international communication’ (240). Specifically, Nikolaev refers to the following lines of Christians (2011a), ‘Cultural relativism ought to remain in the epistemological realm. In so doing it serves as a deterrent to ethno-centrism and promotes cultural diversity, that is, a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of our humanness’ (32). Picking up on Christians’s acquiescence to the ‘wisdom’ of cultural relativism in his dualistic separation of the ‘epistemological level’ from the ‘practical level,’ Nikolaev (2011) then makes the following affirmation: ‘It is a correct statement if we take into account that epistemological means communicational’ (240). However, if it were true that the ‘communicational’ or ‘epistemological’ is where ‘cultural relativism’—or, if one prefers the term, ‘cultural diversity’—may be allowed to thrive, how then could Christians achieve non-relativity in his communication ethics? Even more crucially, if the ‘communicational’ were to remain in the ‘epistemological’—in which presumably, the ‘culturally relative’ / ‘culturally diverse’ is acceptable—how can communications (and media) then fall within the purview of the ‘moral’ and the ‘ethical’, since Christians, in his ontology, also dualistically splits the ‘epistemological’ from the ‘moral sphere,’ as he has done in dealing with the idea of truth (Christians 1997b, 2000c, 2003a, 2004b)?

All the above means that admitting any notion of relativism—be it the ‘moral’ or the ‘epistemologically-sanitized-or-sealed cultural’ one—in whatever ‘realm’ of the human can only lead to instability for a project that attempts to arrive at a non-relative ethical theory. In other words, the undertaking of coming up with an ethical theory that is supposed to decisively defy relativism while being simultaneously ‘international, cross-cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically diverse,’ will need to creatively and courageously blaze a trail away from any sort of relativism instead of dabbling with it even in the semantic sense, as Christians is doing with ‘cultural relativism.’ The fact that Christians has been cited at least once as a champion both against relativism and for it does not bode well for his project to come up with a theory that is non-relative and, indeed, brings us to the difficult conclusion that Christians may not have yet reached his desired objective.
I propose three reasons that have brought about this ironic situation for Christians’s theory. The first is Christians’s mistaken tendency to aggregate all intellectual frameworks that highlight the use of human reason into one, without making the important distinction between those that are correctly oriented to the whole human being—such as the ones of Aristotle and Aquinas, above all—and those that have been ‘mutilated’ by an immanentistic tendency to separate subject and object, which are precisely those of Descartes and the rest of Enlightenment tradition. He has applied to all these frameworks the now derogatory term of ‘rationalism,’ and considers all of these as ‘decontextualized, absolutist, and foundationalist.’

The second reason that Christians’s theory is in a relativistic quandry is corollary to the first: Christians has rejected a priori the viability of the concepts of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence. He has treated all these concepts as part and parcel of a monolithic and unacceptable ‘objective rationalism.’ The effect of this move, however, is serious, since these concepts, when correctly interpreted, are necessary for some of the crucial concepts that Christians has invoked, in the process of developing his theory, to cohere with each other. These concepts include Aristotle’s doctrine of *phronesis* (Christians 2019, 106), which is a species of human reason, and of the ‘unmoved mover’; W.D. Ross’s concept of *prima facie* duties (30), which requires the extra-Cartesian version of human reason to be intellectually defensible; and, most importantly, the conclusions he has made from his own research with Michael Traber (96) that could only be intellectually valid with the presupposition that his own concept of ‘human beingness’ (Christians 2011a, 31) is compatible with the notion of human essence, properly understood in its non-Enlightenment sense. Moreover, the defensibility of Christians’s ‘presupposition,’ which is ‘the holistic human,’ (Christians 2019, 105) depends crucially on an objective reality that can likewise be demonstrated to be non-absolutist.

The third reason that Christian’s theory is in a difficult predicament is an ironic twist to the tale of Christians’s quarrel against Descartes. It appears that Christians, perhaps without fully realizing it, is working within the rationalistic framework of Descartes even as he simultaneously attacks it. This situation, in turn, has come about due to Christians’s deficient identification of the exact connection between rationalism and relativism. Christians has correctly identified the relativistic assertions of many Counter-Enlightenment philosophers—heroes to Christians—as a justified ‘reaction’ to the universal pretensions of Enlightenment rationalism. However, that is an incomplete story, as far as the real relationship between rationalism and relativism is concerned. In fact, relativism is actually the natural—even predictable—result of Cartesian reason that has turned in on itself. The ultimate result of Descartes’ proposal that subjective reason is the source of all knowledge and truth is not only absolute trust in the individual self (individualism) but also the conclusion that there is no truth at all, real knowledge is impossible beyond the self, and we should all just keep our ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ within the bounds of the individual self (relativism). The fact of the matter is that every single one of Christians’s Counter-Enlightenment influences, some of whom have become great influences to historically acknowledged relativists, have worked within a Cartesian framework. They merely replaced Descartes’s boat of
‘mutilated’ reason with the skiff of non-reason (e.g. for example culture, emotion, language, intuition), yet they charted one Cartesian lake with their Enlightenment ‘foes.’ Counter-Enlightenment solutions per se, therefore, will not only not solve the problem of rationalism in media ethics, but will also exacerbate its problem of relativism.

The effective way out of Enlightenment rationalism ought to start with first recovering the original, correct notion of human reason, and then complementing it with notions that give us a deeper insight into the truth of the human—notions such as the importance of human subjectivity, emotion, etc.—that the Counter-Enlightenment historically helped to highlight. On the contrary, in identifying his theory with the essentially relativistic tradition of the Counter-Enlightenment whose view of the human person is obviously incomplete, Christians is dangerously close to directly, albeit unwittingly, contradicting his assertion that he is working with the ‘holistic human.’ Indeed, there can be no wholeness in one’s idea of the human without the explicit recognition that the human being is not only animal symbolicum (Christians 2003b, 12) but also, when defined more basically and more completely, persona. This means that each man or woman, according to Boethius, is rationalis naturae individua substantia. This last phrase can be loosely translated in the context of the present argument as ‘an unarguably individual being whose existence in nature is unrecognizable without the presence and use of reason.’

In summary, Christians begins correctly in challenging the universalist pretensions to ethical normativity of Enlightenment rationalism because it is based on a subverted form of human reason and, therefore, cannot possibly be applicable to the human being properly speaking. He is correct in asserting that ethical and moral relativism is untenable for media ethics—and even ethics in general—because ‘without shared values, the practice of everyday journalism is impossible’ (Christians 2008c, 6). In addressing both problems, however, he has made the unnecessary move of rejecting, or at least avoiding, philosophical tools that would have not only facilitated, but also are key to, a defense against relativism. He has, moreover, erroneously labeled them as ‘decontextualized, absolutist, and foundationalist.’ In reality, the concepts of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence are not all these attributes, if they are understood properly and completely as, among others, compatible with the subjectivity of human beings (Wojtyla 2008b; 1979), fundamental to understanding the whole human (Cortes 2016, 142), and open to ‘ethical construction’ (Christians et al. 2008, 151). If incorporated strategically into Christians’s theory, which is already set up for them anyway, they can arguably bring Christians’s media ethics theory into a better position as an authentically non-relative ethical theory while being legitimately ‘not only international but also cross-cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically diverse’ (Christians, 2019, 29).

**The holistic human as Central standard**

At a time of human history in which the human being’s ‘ability to control the world has also given him a power of destruction so great as to be downright terrifying at times’ (Ratzinger 2005, 346), the ethical theory of Clifford G. Christians, which puts the dignity of the human being and global justice front and center, is a reassurance that there is hope for the human species. By calling his ethical theory an ‘ontological
ethics of being’ he intends both to capture his theory’s holistic character and human-centric approach and to highlight its direct opposition to the utilitarian ethic, of which he is highly critical for its reductionist treatment of the human person.

The holistic character of Christians’s ethical theory is reflected by the fact that the framework of his entire theory is ‘triangular’ in nature. As a theory of communication, he identifies his ethical theory within the more complete and better contextualized tradition of ‘triadic’ communication theories. Christians’s incorporation of an explicit philosophy of technology has given credence to his claim that his ethical theory is a twenty-first-century-ready theory for communication and media ethics. In fact, what makes this ethical theory bold and original in its own right is its new requirement for the ethical calculus: an investigation into the possible effects of technology in decision making. Considering how steeped media, as well as the whole globe, is in technology, it might even be said that it was a much-needed detail only waiting to be added. Of course, the debate continues on just how much technology per se is involved in ethical decisions, and whether, as expressed in the style of Christians, there really is more to technology than being a ‘mere instrument.’ Yet the fact that the real nature of technology—especially vis-à-vis its relationship to human nature—is yet to be fully uncovered, that technology itself is still evolving, and even that the very debate itself exists, are reasons enough to point to the value of considering more deeply the reality of technology in ethics in general and in media ethics in particular.

**Assessing Christians’s theory with classical standards**

Christians’s humancentric attitude towards technology dovetails with the elements that comprise his ‘tri-level’ ethical theory, which likewise puts the human front and center. The presupposition of his ‘tri-level’ theory is the view of human beings as ‘holistic’; its principle and first proto-norm is the ‘universal sacredness of life’; and the rest of his proto-norms, i.e. the precepts of his theory are truth, universal human dignity, and nonviolence, all three of which comprise what he would call cosmopolitan justice.

*Intuitive appeal*. It should be added as well that these features of Christians’s theory speak directly to one of the ‘main standards that are used to evaluate a moral theory’ according to Timmons (2013, 12), which is ‘intuitive appeal.’ The standard means that ‘a moral theory should develop and make sense of various intuitively appealing beliefs and ideas about morality’ (14). Mere random observation demonstrates that the presupposition and proto-norms proposed by Christians meet this standard. Of course, Christians insists that the appearance of these elements in his theory is a result of his ‘research from thirteen (or twenty-seven, in my count) countries’ and their ‘systematic reflection’ of them, and so it is. But it can be argued further that the reason, precisely, that these have garnered general acceptance among scholars and academics in the past decades, despite Steiner’s (2010) observation that there ‘never seemed much to go on’ (111) in Christians’s and Traber’s relatively small study, is that their results speak to every human being’s very core. Thus, its ‘intuitive appeal.’

*Internal support and explanatory power*. Indeed, the framework’s wide acceptance in the field of communication ethics and beyond, despite the apparent internal incoherence among some parts of Christians’s proposals, is indicative that perhaps not only human intuition is involved here, but likewise what Timmons (2013) calls ‘considered
moral beliefs.’ In other words, Christians’s framework passes muster in two other standards of moral theory evaluation proposed by Timmons, namely ‘internal support’ and ‘explanatory power.’ A moral theory has ‘internal support’ if its principles ‘together with relevant factual information, logically imply our considered moral beliefs.’ Conversely, ‘implications that conflict with our considered moral beliefs’ among a theory’s principles are ‘evidence against the correctness of the theory’ (14). Meanwhile, a moral theory has ‘explanatory power’ if it includes principles that explain our more specific considered moral beliefs, thus helping us understand why actions, persons, and other objects of moral evaluation are right or wrong, good or bad, have or lack moral worth. (15)

**External support.** The core of Christians’s tri-level theory, however, even goes beyond intuition and considered moral beliefs in meeting the standards for Timmons’ framework for moral theory assessment. The reason is that the theory’s presupposition and proto-norms ‘are supported by nonmoral beliefs and assumptions, including well-established beliefs and assumptions from various areas of nonmoral inquiry,’ and thus quite confidently meets yet another standard, namely, ‘external support’ (16). That it does is proven by a multitude of scientific literature from different fields outside of ethics that support Christians’s proto-norms and presupposition. Among these are the fields of education (Rud 2011), psychology (King and Sheldon 2001; Melton 1992), comparative religion (Healy 2014), medicine (Redfield 2012), architecture (Cary 2017), law (Melton 1992; Patrick Lee and George 2008; McCrudden 2008), and global politics, especially as captured by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Lagon and Arend 2014).

**Adding the standard of coherence**

Powerful and appealing as the elements and entirety of Christians’s tri-level theory may be, they will have to meet a standard for evaluating moral theory which I believe ought to be added to the framework of Timmons, which is the standard of ‘coherence,’ defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as ‘consistency in reasoning, or relating, so that one part of the discourse does not destroy or contradict the rest’ (Stevenson and Soanes 2003). The coherence of Christians’s theory as an entire system ultimately appears to depend on its admission of the basic Aristotelian notions of reason, objectivity and nature-as-essence. For example, a crucial underpinning of his own theory of universal being—and indeed, the other theories of universal being that he has cited in support of his own (Christians 2009, 281–287, 2019, 116–131)—is the fact that human beings share an objective reality and a common nature or essence. From the outset these two concepts undergird the concept of universals.

These notions, moreover, together with the concept of reason, are also necessary to defend the universal applicability of the proto-norms derived from his study, considering that his research has a very limited sample and uses a methodology that becomes problematic precisely when examined without the philosophical underpinnings he has rejected. Even his claims to using a ‘philosophical anthropology’ in building this theory become dubious and unnecessarily convoluted with an *a priori* rejection of these concepts. Plaisance (2013) has keenly observed that the ‘anthropological realism’ of Clifford Christians ‘implies a neo-Aristotelian orientation’ (95). In fact, a deeper and
more mature look into Aristotle’s approach would reveal that it is not incompatible with the theory of Clifford Christians because Aristotelian ‘rationalism’ is the opposite of Cartesian rationalism. The latter is immanentist, but the former is ‘realistic.’ Since these Aristotelian concepts are, in fact, the opposite of what Christians had described them to be at the outset, and are compatible with his requirements for a contextualized, non-absolutist and non-foundational ethical theory, the problem that provoked their rejection or avoidance by Christians ought to be considered solved. In fine, for his entire theory to be more coherent and become an authentically robust global ethics, rather than a thin and minimalist ethics, Clifford Christians would need to incorporate properly understood—i.e. reclaimed, recovered, extra-Cartesian—versions of crucial concepts such as reason, objectivity, nature-as-essence, etc.

**Theoretical pluralism within a Christian worldview**

In terms of scope, goal, and process Christians’s global media ethics project is ambitious. It is ambitious in its scope because it claims to be global in two senses. First, it takes seriously the whole human person in all his or her complexity. Second, it claims to be applicable to every man and woman journalist all over the world. It is ambitious in its goal because it claims to be both normative and nonrelativistic yet contextualized, non-absolutist, and non-foundationalist. The goal of crafting a version of normative ethics that promises to be credible to a secular society steeped in relativism is challenging indeed, but for Christians this project is worthwhile because he believes that the professional field is in dire need of it (Christians 1985, 1995). It is ambitious in its process because the theory is made within a Christian worldview but ‘must meet the standard of religious diversity’ (Christians 2010a, 147) and theoretical pluralism.

**Overcoming relativism within pluralism**

This last aspect of Christians’s ambition for his global media ethics can only be classified as noble. On the one hand it is refreshing to encounter a highly respected scholar who has been consistently upfront about his faith and yet uses professional language instead of theological arguments to confront secular issues that endanger the rightful place of faith or religion in the public square. On the other hand, the nobility of Christians’s religious inclusivity in his ethical theory lies in the context of the enrichment of the field of ethics itself. Putting his own academic reputation on the line—for example, in opposing the Hastings-Carnegie Study (Christians 2008b, 2007b)—he cogently reasoned out that disregarding this kind of ethics is ‘to write off a huge influx of ethics from around the world’ (Cortes 2016), and obviously to the disadvantage of the field of ethics. Meanwhile, theological or religious ethics provide very meaningful responses to the problem of relativism in ethics (Christians 2010c) as well as to the question of the holistic human being (Christians 2007c). Thus, their inclusion in the conversation on ethics can only enhance ethical discussions. It is within the ambit of such complex and rigorous requirements that Christians wishes to come up with an ethics that is legitimately ‘international, cross-cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically diverse’ yet at the same time non-relativist.
He does this by building his theory from the ground up, which he does primarily through the research with Michael Traber. He likewise uses culturalism, communitarianism, and the philosophy of language as theoretical approaches. In the same line, he rejects all forms of rationalism, formalism, and other similar principles found in divine-command theories since, being in his view exclusivist, foundationalist, and absolutist, these are unacceptable in ethical discussions within the secular world. Christians is correct in using all these approaches to build this theory if the goal is to build one which is intellectually respectable in the secular field. However, his key flaw lies in not distinguishing Descartes’ rationalism from Aristotle’s realistic use of reason, and in consequently rejecting the key notions of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence. With this Christians has unwittingly exposed his cultural and linguistic approaches to relativistic proclivities. Crafting a non-relativist global ethics by way of culture is feasible only when one works within a presuppositional epistemology that human beings across cultures share a certain nature or essence or, in his preferred term, ‘a common humanity’ (Christians, 2019, 30, 106, 119, etc.). This presupposition is perfectly compatible with Christians’s ‘non-imperialist’ approach, because it is not to be imposed (non-absolutist) but rather proposed as something to be uncovered (non-foundationalist) as a way of moving forward coherently. Likewise, a non-relativist global ethics by way of language and hermeneutics is practicable only when one works with the presupposition that the roughly 6500 spoken languages in the world do refer to a reality ‘out there,’ i.e., an objective one, rather than reflect only individual or merely subjective realities.

**Personalism as solution to individualism**

On the topic of individualism, Christians’s understandable zeal to insulate his theory from this Enlightenment element has had the unfortunate effect of inducing the affirmation of the primacy of the community over the human person. This view, however, uncovers the misunderstanding that, in affirming the primacy of the person, one necessarily has to either deny or minimize the importance of community, which is the precise tendency of individualism. However, subordinating the person to the community in order to preserve the theory from individualism is not only unnecessary but, in my opinion, a step in the wrong direction. I contend that the affirmation of Christians threatens the coherence of his theory, both in the context of his ethics of being that claims to highlight human dignity (and thus the dignity of the human person), and of his philosophy of technology that calls for a ‘technological responsibility,’ necessarily demanding personal, moral agency. I propose that the way out of this dilemma can be addressed in two ways.

The first is by considering the personalist framework of Wojtyla (2008a, 2008b, 2008c), which meets Christians’s demands of a realist and holistically human anthropology. Being an anthropology grounded on the principle of objective reality it provides firmer ground for Christians’s theory against relativism and subjectivism. Wojtyla’s emphasis on the importance of community is, in reality, parallel to Christians’s as demonstrated by the fact that, in describing the relationship between person and community, the Polish philosopher first asserts that ‘the person should be subordinate to society in all that is indispensable for the realization of the common
good. However, equally emphatically—and this is the part not as explicit in Christians—he asserts that ‘this subordination may under no circumstances exclude and devalue the persons themselves’ (Wojtyla 2008c, 174). This personalist paradigm sees no conflict between the individual human person and the interests of community because ‘the true common good never threatens the good of the person, even though it may demand considerable sacrifice of a person’ (Wojtyla 2008c, 174).

The second solution can be gleaned from Maritain (1947), who makes a fine distinction between the concepts of ‘individual’ and ‘person,’ two notions that Christians conflates. For Maritain, individuality is that which ‘excludes from oneself all that other men are, (and) could be described as the narrowness of the ego, forever threatened and forever eager to grasp for itself’ (431). Personality, however, is that which ‘signifies interiority to self’ yet at the same time ‘requires a dialogue in which souls really communicate’ (433). In making this fine distinction, Maritain warns against having to ‘misunderstand the distinction between the individual and the person … (and) mistake it for a separation’ (435). This same idea was echoed by Oderberg (2009) as he distinguished between subjectivity and objectivity in the human being without separating them. It can thus be argued from both a metaphysical and semantic sense that affirming the primacy of ‘the person’ is quite different from affirming ‘the individual.’ The former is ‘personalism,’ which is conceptually, not just semantically, distinct from the latter, which is ‘individualism.’

Putting Wojtyla’s and Maritain’s arguments together makes it easier to modify the articulation of the relationship between community and person from its present dubious form—which threatens the coherence of Christians’s theory—to that which firms up the centrality of his basic concepts. I propose that instead of an insistence that the community is axiologically and ontologically prior to the person, what ought to be affirmed is that the community is and ought to be axiologically and ontologically attuned to the person. This articulation highlights such a valuing of community that averts selfish egoism yet simultaneously affirms such a primacy of the human person that insulates the framework against the abuses of totalitarianism. I believe that, at root, this is what Christians wants for his theory.

**Virtue as response to technological ‘mystique’**

Campbell (2010), who like Christians is involved in both communications and religious studies, recognizes ‘the tendency of media to impose a distinctive value set on general society.’ She has acknowledged Christians’s role in highlighting this tendency by ‘offering a general critique of technology from a media ethics and philosophy of communication … using Ellul’s understanding of technology as a basis for framing debates about the impact of media technology on society’ (95). This view of technology beyond the instrumental, while clearly a key factor in significantly making Christians’s inclusion of technology in his ethical theory ‘original,’ has been met with mixed reactions among communications scholars. In my view, both sides of the debate have offered plausible arguments which are not necessarily in conflict with each other. Christians’s view that technology is not a ‘mere instrument’ does not preclude the affirmation that technology also is an instrument. In fact, this view may have the advantage of
positioning us to take on a more ‘prudential’ view of technology, not in the sense that it renders us wary in a conspiratorial or apocalyptic sense, but rather that it encourages a greater openness to the as-yet incompletely unexplored nature and effects of technology.

However, the ‘requirement’ demanded, as it were, of non-instrumentalism to view technology with ‘prudence,’ only highlights the irony that Christians undervalues virtue ethics and the notion of extra-Cartesian reason in his technological framework. On the one hand, his claim that these are deficient has been refuted by highly triadic and virtue-based ethics systems such as those of Charles Ess (2014, 636) and Martha Nussbaum (1999), whom Christians himself esteems. On the other hand, Ellul (1964) advises that the way to get out of ‘technological determinism’ is through each person practicing a sense of responsibility; becoming aware of the need to be responsible; discerning, measuring, and analyzing the ‘determinisms that press on him’ (xxxiii). It can be argued, then, that the main influence on Christians, Ellul himself, has argued, as it were, for the inclusion of virtue ethics and the properly understood notion of reason in strengthening Christians’s theory against critical arguments that attack his view of technology.

**Conclusion: ‘are we there yet?’**

Finally, we need to answer the important question posed near the beginning of this section: does his theory, in whole or in part, succeed in making a way out of the ‘huge challenge (of) amorality’ (Christians 2007a, 96) that threatens students and practitioners of communications in a technological age? The question subsumes several other questions that refer to Christians’s goals for his theory, i.e., (1) to successfully negotiate the twin perils of rationalism and relativism; (2) to be globally normative in a robust sense; (3) to take the whole human person seriously and in his or her proper context; and (4) to properly position itself for the technological complexity of the twenty-first century. The short answer is ‘not yet.’ While the theory is indeed promising when seen “from the perspective of its final proposals or conclusions,” the theory’s difficulties emerge upon a more rigorous scrutiny of “its philosophical foundations or premises” (Cortes 2020, 133).

Christians’s inclusion of technology within his ethical framework not only makes his ethical theory a convincingly original one but also a truly promising media ethics theory for the ‘cybernetic age’ that is the twenty-first century. Moreover, his identification of the holistic human, sacredness of life, and other human realities, all of which speak both intuitively and rationally to the human core as the main elements of his ethical theory, place his theory in a very strong position as a plausible, globally normative ethic. However, as I have argued, Christians has not addressed completely and convincingly the problem of relativism in his theory.

Christians (2009) is quite honest when he declares that his ‘global media ethics… (opens) a pathway out of relativity that is intellectually credible’ (288). In other words, what Christians has spent his entire professional career on has been to reconcile, for the communications professional, the demands of one’s individual responsibility with those of working within a globalized communications environment. Ultimately, this
project reflects the tension between what Aristotle would call the ‘concrete’ and the ‘universal,’ i.e. ‘concrete action’ vis-à-vis ‘universal norms of conduct.’ Christians, moreover, has attempted to effect this reconciliation of realities seemingly at loggerheads with each other, in a manner that is acceptable to different philosophical persuasions. By constructing his theory ‘from the ground up,’ using his research with Traber as basis, he could claim that his theory is ‘not imperialistic in character’ and thus reap the consequent intellectual credibility afforded by such an approach in a secular field. In my view, as it is, his theory has indeed opened a path—and this is a significant step—but not more. For him to convincingly claim that his theory ‘(has) met the challenge for media ethics in a global age’ (288), in the sense that it has addressed the problem of moral relativism beyond reasonable doubt, he would have to answer the issues that were raised in this article. These are issues that, in my view, can only be persuasively addressed through the support of properly understood concepts of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence.

Christians (2008b) claims that his solution to the problem of relativism is ‘ontology, an ethics of being’ (10), but one which, according to his voluminous work, does not explicitly recognize the proper role of human reason and its corollary concepts, and indeed skirts them as much as possible or does away with them outright. This sort of solution, I argue, is equivalent to intellectual sleight of hand. One would have to ask, for example, what sort of ‘being’ Christians is talking about. If his answer to the question is his concept of ‘holistic being,’ and by that he means ‘a being that is not separated dichotomously into reason and the rest, subject and object, etc.,’ then my reply would be that this concept of ‘being’ is perfectly compatible with the ‘reinforced’ original and non-Cartesian notions of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence that, I argue, are crucial—even necessary—concepts in confronting relativism.

Indeed, although Christians has attempted to provide an ‘ontological’ foundation to his concept of human dignity, I submit that his version of this foundation is rather generic and, consequently, weak. That Christians has not successfully gotten rid of relativism is shown by the fact that he has ended up resorting to what appears to be only intellectual hairsplitting as regards ‘cultural relativism’ and ‘moral relativism.’ In this, he pursues the following rather tortured mental process: first, assert that ‘cultural relativism’ and ‘moral relativism’ are distinct, albeit contrary to the affirmations of the culturalist tradition itself; then, in what appears to be a surrender to relativism, accept ‘cultural relativism,’ but with the caveat of doing so only ‘in the epistemological sense’ (Christians 2011a, 32); finally, affirm that ‘moral relativism is rejected at the same time’ (Christians 2009, 288). As a victory over relativism, this questionable line of argument is hardly convincing. It is not convincing because it is unnecessarily complicated rather than intellectually sophisticated. The upshot of this dubious victory against relativism is that the theory of Christians as a globally normative ethic would be at best a thin and minimalist ethic rather than the robust ethic that he claims his theory is or, at least, he wants it to be.

Aside from being an unconvincing response to the challenge of relativism, the theory is also presently beset by a certain degree of incoherence. I have identified two key intellectual dispositions of Christians that, I argue, considerably yet unnecessarily jeopardize the coherence of his entire theory. The first of these is an unjustified aversion to
the Aristotelian concepts of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence (by treating them only in their positivist and Enlightenment subversions) and Aristotelian virtue ethics (by treating it as a deficient framework incompatible with and unnecessary to his theory). Couldry (2006) and Plaisance (2013) both have pointed out Christians’s osten-
sible reliance on Aristotelian concepts even as he trivializes them and have hinted at this incoherence. What if Christians and fellow scholars were to once more ‘work the trenches’ (Christians 1997a, 79, 2002a, 92) of philosophy and theory so that together we could revisit and courageously explore all these concepts that he has rejected a pri-
ori in their complete and genuine, i.e. non-Enlightenment notions? We would discover that these concepts can be marshaled to provide surer footing for his theory against relativism and towards legitimate global claims. I posit that these concepts meet the criteria that Christians correctly identifies for a theory like his that seeks to be acceptable across cultures. They are open to context, dialogue, and construction.

The second intellectual disposition that threatens the coherence of Christian’s theory is an insistence that the community is prior to the person both in value and being. This consistent assertion imperils the coherence of his theory for several reasons. First, it is in conflict with his own concept of communitarianism and reduces, as it were, the ‘quality’ of the contexts that he requires for his ‘human-centric’ ethical theory. Second, it is historically compromised because this articulation of community vis-à-vis the person has been identified with that sort of totalitarianism that Christians himself has expressly rejected for any concept in his theory. Third, given the innumerable abuses that have been committed against human persons and their legitimate rights in the name of ‘community’ this affirmation weakens his proto-norms of human dignity, sacredness of life, truth, nonvio-
ence and cosmopolitan justice. Ironically, in an explanation of the thoughts of an unabashedly person-centric author, Christian Smith, Christians (2015a) has written: ‘A theory of personhood centered on intrinsic human worth opens a pathway between the extremes of positivism and relativism and serves as a model for working with the concept of justice in a global society’ (52). If one takes these words seriously at face value, and draws from them their ultimate consequences, one would come to the inevitable conclusion that Clifford Christians himself has already written a clear affirmation of the primacy of the person that doesn’t endorse individualism but rather promotes community. Indeed, Christians may have already begun, perhaps unwittingly, the journey towards the proper articula-
tion of the relationship between person and community, which is the reverse of what he has been defending all along. Such an articulation would decisively strengthen the coherence of his theory and cement the centrality of his proto-norms.

In summary, this article affirms that Christians’s theory shows great promise as a ‘way out’ of the moral indifference which has become common coin among students and practitioners of media and communications in our cybernetic age yet poses a great threat to them. The theory’s key strengths are a provocative philosophy of technology strategically included in its framework and its identification as a human-centric ethics of being, which speaks to what is authentically human. Moreover, the chances that this theory’s ‘great promise’ will be brought to fulfillment will improve upon its admission
of the enhanced paradigm of Aristotelian concepts elaborated in this article and the correct articulation of the link between person and community that captures their true relationship.

Notes

1. Michael Traber was a priest belonging to the Mission Bethlehem Immensee (SMB), a missionary institute based in Immensee, Switzerland, and who did extensive work in Africa. He was trained in Fordham University, New York, NY (Agenzia Fides 2006).

2. Pepperdine University is “a faith-based university committed to academic excellence and Christian values.” (Pepperdine University 2018) whose main campus is in Malibu, California. Founded in 1937 in Los Angeles, California by George Pepperdine, it now has campuses across Southern California and residential facilities around the world such as Buenos Aires, Argentina; Florence, Italy; Heidelberg, Germany; Lausanne, Switzerland; London, United Kingdom; and Shanghai, China.

3. Baghramian & Carter (2016) have identified ten positions of relativism in talking alone of moral and aesthetic values; as regards culture, they have identified at least four. Constructing a table that “classifies different relativistic positions according what is being relativized, or its objects, and what (it) is being relativized to, or its domains,” they identified twenty such relativisms or “relativistic positions,” including moral subjectivism, aesthetic historicism, and ethical cultural/social relativism.

4. The definitive opus of Clifford Christians that contained his entire theory described below was released to the public in May 2019 (Amazon.com 2019).

5. From its central concept of “dialogue” dialogic ethics “locates ethics in the communicative relationships between people rather than in philosophical thought” (Ballard, Ortiz, and Bell McManus 2016). It should be noted that here are several traditions of “dialogue” (R. Arnett, Harden Fritz, and Bell 2009, 82) and Christians appears open to quite a number of them: the “discourse ethics” tradition of Jürgen Habermas (Christians 2019, 147); the Ich-Du relation of Martin Buber (98); the “neighbour-love” concept elaborated by Hannah Arendt (307); and the “intersubjective dialogue” of Paulo Freire (192); He also quotes Hans-Georg Gadamer (110, 148) as the influence of most of the above thinkers and cites Mikhail Bakhtin (340) in his References.

6. For example, Christians speaks of “a context-free rationality” and “disembodied reason” whose consequence is a preference for “prescriptivist, arid, and absolutist” moral rules and regulations “instead of prizing care and reciprocity …” (Christians 2002c, 166). In another article his critique of reason is focused on reason as having the following undesirable traits: “theoretical” (meaning, not practical), “objective” (this concept has been established earlier as negative), and “ahistorical” (meaning, de-contextualized) (Christians 2005a, 8).

7. An instance of this tortured and, admittedly, confusing reasoning was prompted by Christians’s admission of the term “cultural relativism” into his supposedly “non-relativist” system. In order to get rid of the ethical relativism that has bedevilled this concept from its inception (I. Jarvie 2007, 553), he proposes to “decouple” the concept of cultural relativism from that of moral relativism (Christians 2019, 236; 2011a, 23), then hermetically seal the latter off from its connection to the former in the “epistemological” level. He proposes to do this while applying the same term, i.e., “cultural relativism” but now supposedly “ethical-relativism-free,” in what would seem the “practical” level. To add to the confusion his texts suggest a rather subtle conflation of “cultural relativism” with “cultural diversity” (Christians 2009, 288; 2011a, 24–25; 2019, 236). Aside from being convoluted, this approach smacks of the dualism that Christians himself rejects (Christians 1999, 73; 2005b, 152).

8. The interested reader is referred to the original work (Cortes 2019) for a more thorough discussion of the argument. Due to editorial limitations the arguments can be presented in this article only in very summarized form.
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