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Robert Cortes

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Robert Z. Cortes

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

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Keywords:	Clifford Christians, Communication, media ethics, global justice
Abstract:	<p>Clifford Christians, one of media ethics' leading authorities, first proposed the idea of constructing a new ethical theory for the field as early as 1977 (Christians 1977; Cortes 2019). Since then, Christians has produced a prodigious amount of scholarly work in which he proposed and developed concepts that were to form part of his theory. In 2019, he finally put together in one place all the ideas that he had been developing throughout a very productive career on communication theory, the philosophy of technology, and media ethics. Using primarily a selection of the media ethicist's work from 1977 to 2017, the author identifies the elements of Christians's theory and offers a critical evaluation of the theory's plausibility as a globally normative media ethics. The author 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" (Cortes forthcoming). He concludes the article by offering concrete suggestions he believes are in harmony with the framework of Clifford Christians with the end of settling it more securely within an enhanced human-centeredness while rendering the theory less susceptible to relativism.</p>

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

Clifford Christians, one of media ethics' leading authorities, first proposed the idea of constructing a new ethical theory for the field as early as 1977 (Christians 1977; Cortes 2019). Since then, Christians has produced a prodigious amount of scholarly work in which he proposed and developed concepts that were to form part of his theory. In 2019, he finally put together in one place all the ideas that he had been developing throughout a very productive career on communication theory, the philosophy of technology, and media ethics. Using primarily a selection of the media ethicist's work from 1977 to 2017, the author identifies the elements of Christians's theory and offers a critical evaluation of the theory's plausibility as a globally normative media ethics. The author 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" (Cortes forthcoming). He concludes the article by offering concrete suggestions he believes are in harmony with the framework of Clifford Christians with the end of settling it more securely within an enhanced human-centeredness while rendering the theory less susceptible to relativism.

Keywords: Clifford G. Christians; communication; media ethics; global justice

Subject classification codes: Communication > Media Ethics

Introduction: the significance of Clifford Christians

In his search for a globally normative ethic Clifford Christians is strikingly similar to Hans Küng, the German Roman Catholic theologian considered to be the first scholar to use the term “global ethic” (St. Clair 2012, 1). Even as Küng was formulating this concept in the early 1980s (Casanova 1999) and sowing the seeds of his global project in search of common ethical norms among religions, in the realm of media ethics Christians was proposing a research focus on an ethics that is “multi-tiered... (that sets) limits on consequentialist reasoning by means of universalized principles” (Christians and Rotzoll 1980, 431). This coincidence makes the two more or less contemporaneous in their search for universal ethical norms. The coincidence doesn’t end there: both are scholars with theology degrees who are engaging the secular world in a field that has been historically conflated with religion. More strikingly, both have been highly influenced by the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (Christians 1986; 2019; Falk 1999) who, like the two, was a man who both practiced his faith (Wolin 2001) and offered a view of being and nature “not tied to theology but to reality” (Morris 2013, 10). However, despite their notable similarities and contemporaneity, there is no evidence to suggest that Christians’s global media ethics project was influenced by Küng’s global ethic project or vice-versa.

Thus, the project of formulating universal norms *in media ethics* is necessarily linked to Clifford Christians. “Necessarily” because when normativity in communication and media ethics is the issue, Christians was there from its inception, having made an appeal for “normative approaches to media ethics” as early as 1979 (Craig and Ferré 2006, 123), and is deservedly considered one of its “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

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2
3 acceptable across cultures and has proposed a viable solution to the problems posited by
4
5 ethical normativity's critics. After he and Michael Traber¹ came upon the term
6
7 "protonorm" (Cortes 2016, 147–48) and formally suggested it in 1997 (Plaisance 2013,
8
9 93), a good number of scholars have come to accept this original concept, grounded in
10
11 our humanness, as a plausible basis for a universalizable communication ethics
12
13 (Englehardt 1998; Kitross 2000; Baker 2009; Phillip Lee 2011; Arnett 2013; Caldwell
14
15 2014).

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19 Beyond his assertion of normativity's imperative in media ethics, Clifford
20
21 Christians's authority in the field comes from being a "prophetic voice" at the time
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23 when society has before it an "immense challenge and opportunity in the technical
24
25 realm"(Healey 2010, 134). Crucial to this "'prophetic' critique of mass media" (121) is
26
27 his proposal to treat technology more than a mere instrument, and for that matter, as
28
29 something that ought to be taken more seriously in ethical analysis (Gladney 1994;
30
31 Stout and Buddenbaum 2002; Omachonu and Healey 2009; German 2011).

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35 This "prophetic voice" of Christians, however, goes beyond the content of his
36
37 theory to the *way* that he does his theorizing, which makes Christians stand out as a
38
39 scholar. Cooper (2010) affirms that "it is impossible to divide his theory from his
40
41 practice and to separate his teaching, or if you will his prophecy, from his daily living"
42
43 (106). This means that Christians doesn't put his faith aside "on entering a university, a
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45 professional association, a cultural society...like a man leaving his hat at the door"
46
47 (Escrivá 2002, #353). This transparent connection between professional life and faith
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55 ¹ Michael Traber was a priest belonging to the Mission Bethleem Immensee (SMB), a
56
57 missionary institute based in Immensee, Switzerland, and who did extensive work in Africa. He
58
59 was trained in Fordham University, New York, NY (Agenzia Fides 2006).
60

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3 shone in one interview when he said, “My colleagues here know me as a Christian, and
4 that’s one advantage of being here long enough. You sort of earn your credibility
5 through your work and they at least understand your perspective” (Cortes 2016, 139).
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10 Key to that remark is his reference to the credence he has merited among his
11 colleagues by means of his work; that is, not through, and perhaps in spite of, his
12 Christian faith. It signifies that for him professional life and faith and teaching and daily
13 living are neither to be conflated nor confused. This point is crucial above all in order to
14 fully understand Clifford G. Christians and his works as a “legacy of ... indispensable
15 scholarship” (Plaisance 2011, 108). As well, this point needs to be kept in mind
16 especially in contexts such as that of an address he made at Pepperdine University²
17 during which, in his own words, “I was explicit about my faith commitment” (Cortes
18 2016, 141). Among others, he said, “I am called to live distinctively as God’s agent
19 here, and therefore, the centerpiece of my vocation is ideas... (Christians 2002b).
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33 For most scholars, the upshot of such candidness in one’s faith commitment in
34 the context of their scholarship might have been, according to Marsden (1997), “viewed
35 with puzzlement or even consternation” (13) within the university or academic setting
36 (Marsden 1997; Yancey 2015). In the case of Clifford G. Christians, however, the
37 opposite is true. Among his professional colleagues Christians is seen as not just one
38 intellectual “among the giants of media ethics” (Meyers 2010, 87) but rather the one
39 scholar who might be considered “arguably the standard bearer of media ethics” (Arnett
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52 ² Pepperdine University is “a faith-based university committed to academic excellence and Christian
53 values,” (Pepperdine University 2018) whose main campus is in Malibu, California. Founded in 1937 in
54 Los Angeles, California by George Pepperdine, it now has campuses across Southern California and
55 residential facilities around the world such as Buenos Aires, Argentina; Florence, Italy; Heidelberg,
56 Germany; Lausanne, Switzerland; London, United Kingdom; and Shanghai, China.
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3 2013, 58). This reputation comes as much from being open and consistent about his
4
5 Christian worldview as from his open and pluralistic approach to ethical theory
6
7 building.
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10 Clifford Christians believes that the best chance of helping media “to move all
11 those universal truths off the mental shelf and into journalism's gatekeeping process”
12 would be “consensus development of a set of normative ethics” (Schulman 1986, 29).
13
14 Thus, very early on he proposed building a universal normative theory of media ethics
15 “from the ground up,” based on culture understood as “realities... inherited and built
16 from symbols which shape our action, identity, thoughts, and sentiment” (Christians
17 1977, 11, 13): values, in short. To ward off insinuations of relativism, however, he
18 issues a quick rejoinder in which he rejects the idea “that Reality as a whole is
19 inherently non-structural until it is shaped by human symbols. Man's creative ability
20 works within the limits of God's design as Creator” (14). Thus, Christians’s approach
21 seems to be a *via media* that takes seriously the human being’s complex subjectivity and
22 the fact of man being both a communicative and creative being, as well as the fact of
23 reality existing independently from the human mind and will.
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40 Yet Christians (2011b) has likened the immense difficulty involved in the
41 project as “more like chasing fool’s gold than anything else...” (735). Contributing in
42 large part to the enormous difficulty is the fact that values and culture – the starting
43 point of Christians’s theory building – are ideas which have been claimed or affirmed as
44 relative (hence, shifting and temporary) in the history of thought.³ Christians himself is
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55 ³ Baghramian & Carter (2016) have identified ten positions of relativism in talking alone of
56 moral and aesthetic values; as regards culture, they have identified at least four. Constructing a
57 table that “classifies different relativistic positions according what is being relativized, or its
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3 evidently aware of how tenuous this approach is and has conceded that “this foundation,
4 however, is tentative” (Christians, Fackler, and Ferré 1993, 54). Indeed, the challenge of
5 crafting a globally acceptable ethics has always been to “heroically and often skillfully
6 attempt to maneuver in the muddy waters between the Scylla of nihilistic cultural
7 relativism and the Charybdis of supremacist universalism” (Eriksen 2001, 127). Using
8 the “from the ground up” approach, he has decisively steered clear of the latter. The
9 challenge for his theory, however, still remains that of avoiding the threat of moral
10 relativism while at the same time not falling into the trap of achieving global
11 “community via ethical minimalism” (Robertson 2001, 661).

23 **The media ethics theory of Clifford Christians**

24
25
26 Until some months ago,⁴ what would have been apparent in all the published literature
27 that could be examined so far by and on Clifford G. Christians was that he had not
28 explicitly claimed ownership of a new theory of communication and mass media ethics.
29 One of his collaborators would attribute this to Christians’s “characteristic humility”
30 (Babbili 2008). However, if Christians is not a thinker who has already exclaimed
31 “Eureka!” for a newly found media ethics theory, he gives a strong impression as being
32 one who has spent an entire career searching for and working on such a theory. Since
33 1977 he has been suggesting working on a media ethics theory from the ground up
34 (Christians 1977, 11; 1989a, 123; 2010b, 143). In his most recent work, he still appears
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51 objects, and what (it) is being relativized to, or its domains,” they identified twenty such
52 relativisms or “relativistic positions,” including moral subjectivism, aesthetic historicism, and
53 ethical cultural/social relativism.

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57 ⁴ The definitive opus of Clifford Christians that contained his entire theory and described below
58 was released to the public in May 2019 (Amazon.com 2019).
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60

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2
3 to only hint that he has authored a new media ethics theory – but now, more directly.
4
5 Christians (2019) does this by referring to “constituents of the new theory of
6
7 communication ethics developed here (in this book)” (74). A Chinese professor with
8
9 formidable credentials then reinforces this subtle claim in the Afterword of the same
10
11 book by affirming that Christians “expounds a theoretical paradigm... which endows
12
13 the classical principles of ethics with new meanings... and... restructures theory toward
14
15 an ontological theory of international communication ethics” (Chen 2019, 335).
16
17

18 19 ***The long and the short of it***

20
21 In his latest opus, Christians (2019) often refers to his theory as a “media ethics of
22
23 global justice” (29, 30, 80). For those interested in brevity – imaginably the journalists
24
25 and media professionals with no patience for long academic texts – the theory could be
26
27 summarized through six “elements.” Two of these can be called the theory’s
28
29 “components,” while the other four its “attributes.” The former consists of the following
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31 main (rather dense) proposals:
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35 (1) “sacredness of life” and its corollary principles of truth, human dignity, non-
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37 violence and cosmopolitan justice as universal standards for an international
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39 media ethics; and
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43 (2) a view of technology as not a mere or neutral instrument, but rather as reality
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45 more intricately woven into man’s Being.
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48 The first proposal is that “component” of his theory that Christians refers to as the
49
50 “ethics of Being,” whereas the second proposal is his “philosophy of technology.” Each
51
52 of these components is explained in separate sub-sections below.
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54 55 ***Attributes of the theory***

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57 Aside from its “components,” in order to fully appreciate Christians’s theory, one ought
58
59 to consider as well its “attributes,” i.e., the characteristics that stand out the most in his
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1
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3 theory. These are considered part of the theory's elements because, in fact, these
4
5 attributes help us understand more deeply the theory's components. Specifically, only
6
7 when one understands that Christians's theory is 1) anti-Enlightenment, 2) Counter-
8
9 Enlightenment-inspired, 3) communitarian, and 4) triadic, would one fully appreciate
10
11 Christians's ethics of being and his philosophy of technology.
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14 *Anti-Enlightenment driven*

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16 Since the 1970s to the present Christians has been consistent in criticizing rationalist
17
18 assumptions and Enlightenment-hand-me-down postulates that have not only dominated
19
20 but, more seriously, undergirded the field of mass communication since the foundations
21
22 of ethics in the 1890s down to our highly technological age (Christians 2000a, 16–21;
23
24 2004a, 41–43).
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28 On the one hand, he asserts that Cartesian rationalism, which puts absolute trust
29
30 in human reason alone, cannot be source of “reliable knowledge for living well”
31
32 (Christians 2015c, 39), and that Mill's utilitarian criterion is inadequate in dealing with
33
34 several very crucial issues faced by media today (Christians 2007c, 120). These
35
36 approaches promote “monologic” rather than dialogic ethics (Christians 2007c, 123)
37
38 which is what communication ethics ought to be. On the other hand, he rejects
39
40 Nietzsche's godless order and its consequent relativism since these paradigms can
41
42 neither uphold human personhood nor hold any society together (Christians 1977, 18;
43
44 2009, 277). Moreover, he sees relativism an intellectually unsustainable philosophical
45
46 worldview suffering as it does from an internal contradiction as expressed by
47
48 Mannheim's paradox (Christians 1989a, 126; 1989b, 5; 2005a, 6; 2009, 287). That
49
50 Christians's theory claims to challenge all these “essential” and quasi-dogmatic
51
52 premises in media ethics is why it is, in a sense, novel.
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3 It must be mentioned, however, that Christians (2000a) considers relativism
4 simply as a defiant response to rationalism in what is an apparently dichotomous
5 “rationalism versus relativism” (33) frame. In reality, and more importantly, relativism
6 is rationalism’s direct descendant and its necessary effect. Since Descartes moved
7 reality’s home from outside the self into inside of it, his rationalism unwittingly set up
8 the eventual framework for the birth subjectivism and the thriving of relativism. No
9 wonder one of Karl Popper’s disciples would remark, “The deep error behind
10 relativism... is a passive and individualistic view of human rationality” (I. C. Jarvie
11 1983, 45).

12 *Counter-Enlightenment inspired*

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

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2
3 However, the history of philosophy has demonstrated that the Counter-
4 Enlightenment “always ran the risk of encouraging” relativism and, when it did, had “no
5 resources to quell (it)” (Lilla 2003, 10). This is not surprising since, as Pocock (2004)
6 had already hinted, the Counter-Enlightenment was nothing but one Enlightenment in
7 conflict with another within the same intellectual universe. In the analogy of Tallis
8 (1997), the Counter-Enlightenment is Enlightenment’s child who “tends to bite the
9 hands that feed it” (204). Rosen (2002) draws an even more picturesque analogy as he
10 draws our attention to one thinker notorious for his rejection of “rationalism and so to
11 an excessive praise of passions and emotions.” This is Friedrich Nietzsche, “a great son
12 of the Enlightenment who sees the faults of his father with special clarity, but who is
13 himself finally brought down by his genetic destiny” (11). More to the point, the
14 susceptibility of Counter-Enlightenment proposals to lead to relativism and skepticism
15 is a clue that these proposals have not escaped the Cartesian rationalistic system. For
16 this reason, a theory as that of Christians, which seeks to reject relativism and
17 rationalism, would need to reconsider this intellectual tradition as the source of its
18 framework.

39 *Communitarian in scope*

40
41 Christians presents “communitarian ethics” as a more comprehensive alternative ethical
42 framework to what he refers to as “mainstream ethics” – virtue ethics, utilitarian ethics,
43 and duty ethics – which “make individual choice and accountability their centerpiece”
44 and are all “Eurocentric.” Since, according to its proponents, the basis of communitarian
45 ethics is human relationships it ought to “ring true both North and South, and in
46 Western and Eastern cultures... (to meet) the most stringent tests of non-parochialism”
47 (Christians, Fackler, and Ferré 2012, xvi). Considering the global scope of the field of
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3 communications and media Christians believes that the communitarian approach to
4
5 ethics is the best course of action.
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8 In an interview, he was asked about “the trajectory of (communitarianism) in
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10 terms of its development to its present articulation... (and) what direction...this concept
11
12 was developing” (Cortes 2016, 145). Hinting at how he has continued to refine this idea
13
14 throughout his career Christians reveals that while working on one collaborative project,
15
16 he decided to abandon the term which he already found “a bit too narrow.” He now
17
18 prefers the term “*communitas*, in the tradition of Western philosophy.” The project
19
20 began years previously as “a challenge from South Africa” which has its own concept
21
22 of communitarianism called *ubuntu*. Working on that project Christians realized that “to
23
24 use terms like communal, or *communitas*, is better than ‘communitarianism’ because the
25
26 latter still has this American context in which it emerged politically” (146). In
27
28 considering an extra-American context, Christians echoes one of his inspirations in the
29
30 philosophy of language, Paul Ricoeur, who said that “communitarianism is...mainly
31
32 used in the Anglo-Saxon context” (Tóth 1999, 6) and reflects his strong commitment to
33
34 making his media ethics theory transnational and multicultural.
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39 40 *Triadic in approach*

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42 Clifford Christians approaches the construction of his theory in an explicitly
43
44 “triangular” manner. This means, firstly, that he is positioning his own media ethics
45
46 theory in the tradition of “triadic” communication theories that have appeared
47
48 throughout history (2014a) instead of dyadic transmission models of communication,
49
50 which are possibly the most widely known in the discipline (Chang 2009). Whereas
51
52 dyadic formulae require only the elements of sender-receiver and message, triadic
53
54 theories require, in addition, the actual contexts in which human agents find themselves
55
56 – contexts such as technologies, the physical environment, and their professional
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3 practice (Christians 2019). Christians, by design, has incorporated into his media ethics
4 theory a “human-centered” philosophy of technology that takes into account the nature
5 of modern media technologies. Having thus equipped his media ethics theory, he is
6 convinced that it promises to offer an intrinsically more global understanding of media
7 (Christians et al. 2008).
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14
15 The other instance of this triangular approach to theory-building in Christians is
16 seen in his development – together with colleagues from different parts of the world –
17 of an ethical theory that consists of “three levels that interact dynamically in ethical
18 experience – the levels of presupposition, principle, and precept.” These concepts have
19 an interesting history and a meaning in Christians’s theory deeper than their quotidian
20 usage, but these can be described here very briefly. By “presupposition” Christians
21 basically means one’s worldview. Not surprisingly, the basic presupposition that he
22 holds in his media ethics theory is one that is quite in harmony with his theism: the view
23 of human beings as “holistic humans” (Christians, 2019, Christians, Rao, Ward, &
24 Wasserman, 2008, 146). By “principle” he means a universal “controlling norm” or
25 “master value” to which further norms would be answerable to or one which other
26 values reflect or are derived. In Christians’s theory, this is the sacredness of human life
27 (Christians, 2019, 74). Lastly, “precepts” are his “operating principles,” the “more
28 concrete” element of the three concepts in this triad and, as it were, gives a “more
29 specific, practical resolution” to the first two concepts. These are human dignity, truth
30 telling, and nonviolence. He avers that this “tri-level” theory is dynamic enough to be
31 “compatible, in principle, with the fact of change in our ethical values across time and
32 culture” (Christians et al. 2008, 138, 151). Presumably, Christians’s own “ethics of
33 universal being” (136), which recognizes the necessity of both universality and respect
34 for diversity in a normative global media ethics and likewise subsumes the three levels
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3 just described, fits into this triangular framework.
4

5 ***Components of the theory***

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7 In developing a communication and media ethics for the twenty-first century, Christians
8 (2019) is only too aware that the real order of the day is addressing the challenges posed
9
10 by the “current digital era of networking, search engines, computer databases, online
11
12 and cyberspace” (7). These technologies have enabled previously unthinkable yet now
13
14 standard instantaneous communication among transnational audiences that is impossible
15
16 to regulate by nationally bound codes of media ethics. It is for this reason that he
17
18 incorporates into his ethical theory both an explicit philosophy of technology and an
19
20 ethical framework that is “viable transnationally” (74). For the latter, he is convinced
21
22 that such a framework ought to be “constitutive of our humanness,” i.e. “an ontological
23
24 ethics, an ethics of being that affirms reverence for life on earth as the rationale for
25
26 ethical decision making” (75).
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33 ***Ethics of Being***

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35 When Clifford Christians classifies his media ethics theory as an “ethics of being,” he
36
37 means that it is one that is founded not on “a truncated notion of humans as (mere)
38
39 rational individuals” – another apparent swipe at Cartesian rationalism and utilitarian
40
41 individualism – but rather on Being, by which he means “the holistic notion of humans
42
43 as humans-in-relation” (Christians 2008d, 7). As well, it is a reference to his
44
45 communitarian paradigm.
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49 His “ethics of being” affirms the “sacredness of life as the supreme universal”
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51 (i.e., *the principle*) and entails basic principles “that are grounded in our common
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53 humanity—truth, human dignity, non-violence.” These three “operating principles” or
54
55 “precepts,” interacting with each other, form Christians’s definition of the
56
57 “cosmopolitan justice of being,” which he proposes as the “normative standard” by
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3 which media professionals and users should measure their ethics (Christians 2019). All
4 these concepts fall under a bigger concept that is now practically identified with
5
6 Clifford Christians: “proto-norms,” i.e., principles that “lie underneath” others (Cortes,
7
8 2016).
9

10
11
12 The concept of justice is central in the media ethics of Christians. This centrality
13 is shown, among others, by the fact that, on at least two occasions, he conflates or
14 replaces human dignity, one of his three basic principles, with justice (Christians 1997c,
15 14; 2008d, 18). He has even gone to the extent of affirming that truth, human dignity,
16 non-violence (principles arising from his ethics of being) are a species of justice
17 (Christians 2019). Through this he is affirming a “universal theory of media ethics”
18 while condemning the two extremes of absolutism and relativism (Christians et al.
19 2008) because these two philosophical approaches are not “ontological,” i.e. they do not
20 get into the universal source of ethics which is man’s being. In distinguishing
21 “universal” from “absolute” and in broaching the idea of “being” he doesn’t make
22 reference to either Aristotle or Aquinas but rather to Heidegger. Consequently,
23 Christians bases his “ethics of Being” on Heideggerian philosophy and its concept of
24 being, *Dasein* (Heidegger 1996).
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43 The exploration of *Dasein* is beyond the scope of this article, yet potential
44 difficulties must be mentioned for an ethics of being with the attributes that Christians
45 describes when based on this particular concept. These arise from two issues
46 confronting Heidegger’s philosophy of which *Dasein* is central. The first is Heidegger’s
47 relativism and the second his “atheism... the refusal of a theological voice” (Hemming
48 2002) in philosophy. As regards the former, although the jury is still out among
49 Heidegger scholars as regards Heidegger’s relativism (in general), a good number
50 nevertheless affirms it (Gregory 2016; Barash 2003; Margolis 1992; Apel 1992; Holtug
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3 1992; Kockelmans 1973). As regards the latter, the issue is not “Heidegger’s personal
4 faith (or personal atheism), if there is one to speak of” (Grondin 2003), but rather his
5 “methodological axiom” of treating “philosophy to be of atheist character... (and) as it
6 were, brackets the question of God” (Vedder 2003, 137). In Heidegger’s own words,
7 “faith has no room in thinking” (Vycinas 2012, 314). C.S. Gilson (2011) affirms that
8 Heidegger’s *Dasein* vis-à-vis Thomistic “being” or *esse* are two notions distinct from
9 and incompatible with each other. Among other reasons, Heidegger’s *Dasein* is the
10 central concept of a philosophy which, according to Dillard (2011), rejects “the notion
11 that the universe is created by a metaphysically independent Creator,” and thus, “can be
12 described as a kind of atheology” (1). If this substantiated view is correct, then we are
13 presented not only with a logical explanation and premise of Heidegger’s disputed
14 relativism, but also with the irony that Christians’s ethics of Being is apparently based
15 on a philosophical presupposition opposite his own, which he has affirmed clearly as
16 not only “theistic” (Christians 2010b, 148) but also “Christian” (p. 147). In any case,
17 considering all the above, one would at least raise the question whether the central
18 concept of “being” of a philosophy as Heidegger’s – both admittedly “atheistic” and
19 suspiciously relativistic – would be the best substratum for a media ethics that aims to
20 be securely non-relativist and open to faith as the one of Clifford Christians.
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45 *Philosophy of technology*

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48 Considering that communication is now more and more inextricably linked with media
49 technologies Clifford Christians incorporates an explicit a philosophy of technology
50 with his “ethics of Being.” Deeply influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger and
51 Jacques Ellul, he has long been convinced of technology’s tendency to intrude into the
52 full flourishing of the human being and get in the way of the “ontological and historical
53 vocation” of all men and women to become “fully human.” This, he believes, can be
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3 achieved only through language – specifically, through dialogue – echoing Paulo Freire.
4
5 (Christians 2004c; 2007b; 2011c; 2019). He thus styles his philosophy of technology as
6
7 “human-centered” in direct contrast to the “instrumentalist” one whose origins he traces
8
9 to Aristotle. As expected, he is highly unsparingly critical of both instrumentalism and
10
11 its originator (Christians 1997a, 68; 2000b, 80).
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14
15 In the mind of Clifford Christians “instrumentalism” is more nuanced than its
16
17 obvious meaning, “technology as a mere tool.” For Christians instrumentalism seems to
18
19 mean *the naïve view of technology as neutral or a mere instrument or tool by which one*
20
21 *unwittingly lays down the conditions for considering technology as an idol, and / or*
22
23 *vice-versa*. This nuanced meaning of instrumentalism is found in varying degrees in his
24
25 writings on the philosophy of technology from 1997 onwards. For example, on the idea
26
27 of deified technology as well as instrumental technology, he writes: “contemporary
28
29 industrial culture is an instrumentalist order of amoral means and technocratic
30
31 efficiency, in opposition to the religious imagination” (Christians 1997a, 65); on neutral
32
33 technology: “instrumentalism compels politicians and social theorists to fret over
34
35 technology’s impact, but engineering efficiency is required in the laboratory” (66 – 67).
36
37 He later writes, “We ought to destroy our modern idols... demythologize today’s
38
39 illusions about technological prowess... and (shatter) all divinatory claims by the
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41 technological and bureaucratic domains” (Christians 2006, 156).
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48 Christians appears convinced as ever of instrumentalism’s inadequacy for his
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50 media theory that aims to be applicable to a highly digital, multi-cultural international
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52 environment. His writings suggest that instrumentalism may even be the cause that the
53
54 world is getting all its communication ethics, and perhaps ethics itself, wrong. The
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56 reason is that, for Christians, this technological view has confined media ethics to
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58 treating technology in only one of its less important aspects, i.e. as an instrument. For
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2
3 him, the instrumentalist view has derailed media ethics from viewing technology more
4 completely or more profoundly as it should be or have been viewed. Consequently,
5 analysis and application of all ethical action involving communication and media in this
6 technological society would be deficient and thus, necessarily, flawed. This is why, just
7 like his major influences in the philosophy of technology, Christians “challenges
8 cultural theories of the media and mass communication to take technology seriously”
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10 (Christians, 2014c, 527).
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19 He thus proposes a “human-centered view of technology,” of which he actually
20 means three things. The first and most obvious sense is *a view that is mindful of what*
21 *technology has done and could do to humanity*. Following Jacques Ellul, he is warning
22 us not against technological products but rather against the “spirit of machineness,” a
23 “mystique” that is confronting and dominating the human person – a spiritual being –
24 who is the center of such crucial areas of human endeavors as morality, politics, culture,
25 ethics, and education (Christians 2011b, 730; 2019). Second, by “human-centered
26 technology” Christians means one in which “people and the material are intertwined”
27 (Christians 2010b, 152), following the lead of Martin Heidegger all the way to the
28 German philosopher’s interpretation of the human being which is too dense to include
29 in this article. The third and last nuance is *technology at the service of human*
30 *flourishing*. It is the obvious result of the two previous nuances, the most
31 straightforward meaning of the term, and the one that most often shines in his work.
32 For Christians, when technology is seen as a mere instrument, the result is that machine-
33 like efficiency becomes the most important standard of human life, and the realities that
34 affirm more our humanity – e.g., morals, culture, relationships – are take the back seat.
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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 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, the only type of normativity worth the name. 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

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2
3 twenty-first century communications and media practitioners and students. The question
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5 now is whether Christians has been successful in this project, and to what extent,
6
7 assuming the present form and content of the theory that he is proposing.
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10 ***Correcting the wrongs of rationalism and relativism***

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12 Although undoubtedly also aware of the positive effects of the Enlightenment culture,
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14 Christians has consistently called out its most dominant defects in his works and has
15
16 demonstrated that it is not a sustainable framework for an authentic global media ethics
17
18 in a technological world. Christians understands, and has made us to understand, that
19
20 for a media ethics of a sustainable sort to come about, an ethical paradigm shift must
21
22 happen: it must be inclusive of other cultures and worldviews outside of the West, must
23
24 consider the human being as a holistic reality, and must take into account the more
25
26 subtle and unexamined involvement of technology in ethical decisions. Moreover, by
27
28 suggesting an understanding of technology beyond the merely “instrumental view”
29
30 (which, in his view, has been sustained by a rationalistic outlook) and by pointing
31
32 towards a perspective in which technology has a direct, albeit yet-incompletely-
33
34 understood involvement in ethical decision-making, Christians caps his thorough
35
36 attempt in rectifying a media ethics that has been at the mercy of Enlightenment
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38 rationalism on one end, and of relativism on the other.
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44 ***Not the right reason***

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46 In attacking the Enlightenment tradition, Christians has correctly identified its basic
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48 malaise in the area of human reason. In so doing, however, instead of recognizing the
49
50 fact (and then reacting accordingly) that Enlightenment reason “does not express human
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52 reason in its fullness, but only a part of it” and that “because it thus mutilates reason, it
53
54 cannot be considered rational” (Ratzinger 2005, 352), Christians ostensibly consigns the
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56 entire concept of reason into the hands of the Enlightenment. Consequently, in his
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3 project of “re-theorizing theory from the ground up” he treats reason at best with what I
4 call “effective indifference.” What does this mean? In Christians’s writings it is clear
5
6 that two concepts of reason and rationality are at play – one Cartesian and another non-
7
8 Cartesian – and that the latter concept is inescapable for his system to be coherent.
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12 Despite these facts, Christians appears to “effectively” acknowledge only the existence
13
14 of the Enlightenment concept while he seems to minimize – i.e. feign indifference to –
15
16 the other, more quotidian meaning. The proof of the former is that when Christians
17
18 treats reason in its Cartesian version, which he does in the great majority of his writings,
19
20 “reason” is vehemently attacked in unmistakable and what feels quite visceral fashion.⁵
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24 As regards the latter, even though it is fairly obvious that one of Christians’s central
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26 concepts includes Aristotle’s *phronesis* or practical *reason* itself and the rest require the
27
28 guidance of reason to work, he uses this understanding of “reason” nonchalantly, almost
29
30 imperceptibly, and certainly not with the same emphasis as he does when he talks about
31
32 rationality as an Enlightenment vice. On some occasions Christians even avoids the
33
34 words “reason,” “rational,” or their direct derivatives themselves, preferring words like
35
36 “order,” “prioritize,” “construct,” etc. without apparently realizing that these are
37
38 inextricably linked to and presuppose reason and rationality. Together with the concept
39
40 of reason or rationality, Christians also concedes the notions of objectivity and nature-
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49 ⁵ For example, Christians speaks of “a context-free rationality” and “disembodied reason”
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51 whose consequence is a preference for “prescriptivist, arid, and absolutist” moral rules and
52
53 regulations “instead of prizing care and reciprocity...” (Christians 2002c, 166). In another
54
55 article his critique of reason is focused on reason as having the following undesirable traits:
56
57 “theoretical” (meaning, not practical), “objective” (this concept has been established earlier as
58
59 negative), and “ahistorical” (meaning, de-contextualized) (Christians 2005a, 8)
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3 as-essence – in general, the entire metaphysical approach – to the Enlightenment, and
4
5 has opted instead to create a system that ostensibly attempts to obviate all these
6
7 concepts.
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10 It is not clear whether Christians has chosen this path either because he is
11
12 convinced that these concepts are dispensable and not worth reclaiming, or rather
13
14 because he perceives that, despite their importance, they are impossible to recover. At
15
16 least one cannot glean which is which whenever Christians articulates his justification
17
18 for avoiding these concepts such as in the following text. “There are major paradoxes in
19
20 current theories with their linguistic turn. However, they speak in concert against
21
22 foundational knowledge – against metaphysics, universal reason, ethical systems,
23
24 correspondence views of truth, and essentialist theories of human nature” (Christians,
25
26 2002c). Ironically, despite steering clear of the metaphysical concepts of reason,
27
28 objectivity, and essence, which he appears to consign now to the Enlightenment
29
30 tradition, he insists that “rather than move uncritically from objectivity to subjectivity or
31
32 from correspondence to coherence views of truth, I believe resolution emerges from
33
34 philosophical *anthropology*” (Christians, 2008c, 9). This statement, of course, raises the
35
36 question of what sort of “human” (ἄνθρωπος or *anthropos* in Greek) Christians is
37
38 talking about in this “anthropology” in which reason (of whatever sort) does not seem to
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40 have a place.
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47 Regardless, however, of Christians’s sincere attitude towards these specified
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49 concepts, the end result of avoiding them has been to steer him into using arguments
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51 which are not only rather convoluted and confusing but also quite susceptible to
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53 relativism, and reflective of culturalism, emotionalism, and intuitionism which have all
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2
3 been identified as types of relativism (Baghramian & Carter, 2016).⁶ The upshot of all
4 this is that, aside from being someone that Plaisance (2011) has pointed as one who
5 “provides compelling rhetoric in the battle against moral relativism” (p. 98), Christians
6 has also been cited by Nikolaev (2011), ironically, as the authority to support the claim
7 that “relativism seems to be the only fail-safe perspective in international
8 communication” (240). Specifically, Nikolaev refers to the following lines of Christians
9 (2011a), “Cultural relativism ought to remain in the epistemological realm. In so doing
10 it serves as a deterrent to ethno-centrism and promotes cultural diversity, that is, a
11 comprehensive and inclusive understanding of our humanness” (32). Picking up on
12 Christians’s acquiescence to the “wisdom” of cultural relativism in his dualistic
13 separation of the “epistemological level” from the “practical level,” Nikolaev (2011)
14 then makes the following affirmation: “It is a correct statement if we take into account
15 that epistemological means communicational” (240). However, if it were true that the
16 “communicational” or “epistemological” is where “cultural relativism” – or, if one
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38 ⁶ An instance of this tortured and, admittedly, confusing reasoning was prompted by
39 Christians’s admission of the term “cultural relativism” into his supposedly “non-relativist”
40 system. In order to get rid of the ethical relativism that has bedevilled this concept from its
41 inception (I. Jarvie 2007, 553), he proposes to “decouple” the concept of cultural relativism
42 from that of moral relativism (Christians 2019, 236; 2011a, 23), then hermetically seal the latter
43 from its connection to the former in the “epistemological” level. He proposes to do this while
44 applying the same term, i.e., “cultural relativism” but now supposedly “ethical-relativism-free,”
45 in what would seem the “practical” level. To add to the confusion his texts suggest a rather
46 subtle conflation of “cultural relativism” with “cultural diversity” (Christians 2009, 288; 2011a,
47 24–25; 2019, 236). Aside from being convoluted, this approach smacks of the dualism that
48 Christians himself rejects (Christians 1999, 73; 2005b, 152).
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3 prefers the term, “cultural diversity” – may be allowed to thrive, how then could
4
5 Christians achieve non-relativity in his communication ethics? Even more crucially, if
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7 the “communicational” were to remain in the “epistemological” – in which presumably,
8
9 the “culturally relative” / “culturally diverse” is acceptable – how can communications
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11 (and media) then fall within the purview of the “moral” and the “ethical” since
12
13 Christians, in his ontology, dualistically splits as well the “epistemological” from the
14
15 “moral sphere,” as he has done in dealing with the idea of truth (Christians 1997b;
16
17 2000c; 2003a; 2004b)?
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21 All the above means that admitting any notion of relativism – be it the “moral”
22
23 or the “epistemologically-sanitized-or-sealed cultural” one – in whatever “realm” of the
24
25 human can only lead to instability for a project that attempts to arrive at a non-relative
26
27 ethical theory. In other words, the undertaking to come up with an ethical theory that is
28
29 supposed to decisively defy relativism while being simultaneously “international, cross-
30
31 cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically diverse,” will need to creatively and
32
33 courageously blaze a trail *away* from *any sort* of relativism instead of dabbling with it
34
35 even in the semantic sense, as Christians is doing with “cultural relativism.” The fact
36
37 that Christians has been cited at least once as a champion both *against* relativism and
38
39 *for it* does not bode well for his project to come up with a theory that is non-relative
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41 and, indeed, brings us to the difficult conclusion that Christians may not have yet
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43 reached his desired objective.
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48 49 *Reasons for the quandary*

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51 I propose three reasons that has brought about this ironic situation for Christians’s
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53 theory. The first is Christians’s mistaken tendency to aggregate all intellectual
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55 frameworks that highlight the use of human reason into one without making the
56
57 important distinction between those that are correctly oriented to the whole human
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3 being – as the one of Aristotle and Aquinas, above all – and those that have been
4
5 “mutilated” by an immanentistic tendency to separate subject and object, which is
6
7 precisely those of Descartes and the rest of Enlightenment tradition. He has applied to
8
9 all these frameworks the now derogatory term of “rationalism,” and considers all of
10
11 these as “decontextualized, absolutist, and foundationalist.”
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14
15 The second reason that Christians’s theory is in a relativistic quandary is
16
17 corollary to the first: Christians has rejected *a priori* the viability of the concepts of
18
19 reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence. He has treated all these concepts as part and
20
21 parcel of a monolithic and unacceptable “objective rationalism.” The effect of this
22
23 move, however, is serious since these concepts, when correctly interpreted, are
24
25 necessary for some of the crucial concepts that Christians has invoked, in the process of
26
27 developing his theory, to cohere with each other. These concepts include Aristotle’s
28
29 doctrine of *phronesis* (Christians 2019, 106), which is a species of human reason, and of
30
31 the “unmoved mover”; W.D. Ross’s *prima facie* duties (30), which requires the extra-
32
33 Cartesian version of human reason to be intellectually defensible; and, most
34
35 importantly, the conclusions he has made from his own research with Michael Traber
36
37 (96) that could only be intellectually valid with the presupposition that his own concept
38
39 of “human beingness” (Christians 2011a, 31) is compatible with the notion of human
40
41 essence, properly understood in its non-Enlightenment sense. Moreover, the
42
43 defensibility of Christians’s “presupposition,” which is “the holistic human,” (Christians
44
45 2019, 105) depends crucially on an *objective* reality that can likewise be demonstrated
46
47 to be *non-absolutist*.
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55 The third reason that Christian’s theory is in a difficult predicament is an ironic
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57 twist to the tale of Christians’s quarrel against Descartes. It appears that Christians,
58
59 perhaps without fully realizing it, is working within the rationalistic framework of
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2
3 Descartes even as he simultaneously attacks it. This situation, in turn, has come about
4
5 due to Christians's deficient identification of the exact connection between rationalism
6
7 and relativism. Christians has correctly identified the relativistic assertions of many
8
9 Counter-Enlightenment philosophers – heroes to Christians – as a justified “reaction” to
10
11 the universal pretensions of Enlightenment rationalism. However, that is an incomplete
12
13 story, as far as the real relationship between rationalism and relativism is concerned. In
14
15 fact, relativism is actually the natural – even predictable – *result* of Cartesian reason that
16
17 has turned in on itself. The ultimate result of Descartes' proposal that subjective reason
18
19 is the source of all knowledge and truth is not only absolute trust in the individual self
20
21 (individualism) but also the conclusion that there is no truth at all, real knowledge is
22
23 impossible beyond the self, and we should all just keep each of our “truth” and
24
25 “knowledge” within the bounds of the individual self (relativism). The fact of the matter
26
27 is that every single one of Christians's Counter-Enlightenment influences, some of
28
29 whom have become great influences to historically acknowledged relativists, have
30
31 worked within a Cartesian framework. They merely replaced Descartes's boat of
32
33 “mutilated” reason with the skiff of non-reason (e.g. for example culture, emotion,
34
35 language, intuition), yet they charted one Cartesian lake as their Enlightenment “foes.”
36
37 Counter-Enlightenment solutions per se, therefore, will not only *not* solve the problem
38
39 of rationalism in media ethics, but will also exacerbate its problem of relativism.
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47 The effective way out of Enlightenment rationalism ought to start with *first*
48
49 recovering the original, correct notion of human reason, and *then* complementing it with
50
51 notions that give us a deeper insight into the truth of the human – notions such as the
52
53 importance of human subjectivity, emotion, etc. – that the Counter-Enlightenment
54
55 historically helped to highlight. On the contrary in identifying his theory with the
56
57 essentially relativistic tradition of the Counter-Enlightenment whose view of the human
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3 person is obviously incomplete, Christians is dangerously close to directly, albeit
4
5 unwittingly, contradicting his assertion that he is working with the “holistic human.”
6
7 Indeed, there can be no wholeness in one’s idea of the human without the explicit
8
9 recognition that the human being is not only *animal symbolicum* (Christians 2003b, 12)
10
11 but also, when defined more basically and more completely, *persona*. This means that
12
13 each man or woman, according to Boethius, is *rationalis naturae individua substantia*.
14
15 This last phrase can be loosely translated in the context of the present argument as “an
16
17 unarguably *individual* being whose existence in nature is unrecognizable without the
18
19 presence and use of reason.”
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23
24 In summary, Christians begins correctly in challenging the universalist
25
26 pretensions to ethical normativity of Enlightenment rationalism because it is based on a
27
28 subverted form of human reason and, therefore, cannot possibly be applicable to the
29
30 human being properly speaking. He is correct in asserting that ethical and moral
31
32 relativism is untenable for media ethics – and even ethics in general – because “without
33
34 shared values, the practice of everyday journalism is impossible” (Christians 2008c, 6).
35
36 In addressing both problems, however, he has made the unnecessary move of rejecting,
37
38 or at least avoiding, philosophical tools that would have not only facilitated, but also are
39
40 key to, a defense against relativism. He has, moreover, erroneously labeled them as
41
42 “decontextualized, absolutist, and foundationalist.” In reality, the concepts of reason,
43
44 objectivity, and nature-as-essence are not all these attributes, if they are understood
45
46 properly and completely as, among others, compatible with the subjectivity of human
47
48 beings (Wojtyla 2008b; 1979), fundamental to understanding the whole human (Cortes
49
50 2016, 142), and open to “ethical construction” (Christians et al. 2008, 151). If
51
52 incorporated strategically into Christians’s theory, which is already set up for them
53
54 anyway, they can arguably bring Christians’s media ethics theory to a better position as
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1
2
3 an authentically non-relative ethical theory while being *legitimately* “not only
4 international but also cross-cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically diverse”
5
6
7 (Christians, 2019, 29).
8
9

10 ***The holistic human as central standard***

11
12 At a time of human history in which the human being’s “ability to control the world has
13 also given him a power of destruction so great as to be downright terrifying at times”
14
15 (Ratzinger 2005, 346), the ethical theory of Clifford G. Christians, which puts the
16
17 dignity of the human being and global justice front and center, is a reassurance that
18
19 there is hope for the human species. By calling his ethical theory an “ontological ethics
20
21 of being” he intends both to capture his theory’s holistic character and humancentric
22
23 approach and to highlight its direct opposition to the utilitarian ethic, of which he is
24
25 highly critical for its reductionist treatment of the human person.
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31 The holistic character of Christians’s ethical theory is reflected by the fact that
32
33 the framework of his entire theory is “triangular” in nature. As a theory of
34
35 communication, he identifies his ethical theory within the more complete and better
36
37 contextualized tradition of “triadic” communication theories. Christians’s incorporation
38
39 of an explicit philosophy of technology has given credence to his claim that his ethical
40
41 theory is a twenty-first-century-ready theory for communication and media ethics. In
42
43 fact, what makes this ethical theory bold and original in its own right is its new
44
45 requirement for the ethical calculus: an investigation into the possible effects of
46
47 technology in decision making. Considering how steeped media, as well as the whole
48
49 globe, is in technology it might even be said that it was a much-needed detail only
50
51 waiting to be added. Of course, the debate continues on just how much technology *per*
52
53 *se* is involved in ethical decisions, and whether, as expressed in the style of Christians,
54
55 there really is more to technology than being a “mere instrument.” Yet the fact that the
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3 real nature of technology – especially vis-à-vis its relationship to human nature – is yet
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5 to be fully uncovered, that technology itself is still evolving, and even that the very
6
7 debate itself exists, are reasons enough to point to the value of considering more deeply
8
9 the reality of technology in ethics in general and in media ethics in particular.
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11

12 *Assessing Christians's theory with classical standards*

13
14 Christians's humancentric attitude towards technology dovetails with the elements that
15
16 comprise his "tri-level" ethical theory, which likewise puts the human front and center.
17
18 The presupposition of his "tri-level" theory is the view of human beings as "holistic";
19
20 its principle and first proto-norm is the "universal sacredness of life"; and the rest of his
21
22 proto-norms, i.e. the precepts of his theory are truth, universal human dignity, and
23
24 nonviolence, all three of which comprise what he would call cosmopolitan justice.
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28 *Intuitive appeal.* It should be added as well that these features of Christians's theory
29
30 speak directly to one of the "main standards that are used to evaluate a moral theory"
31
32 according to Timmons (2013, 12), which is "intuitive appeal." The standard means that
33
34 "a moral theory should develop and make sense of various intuitively appealing beliefs
35
36 and ideas about morality" (14). Mere random observation demonstrates that the
37
38 presupposition and proto-norms proposed by Christians meet this standard. Of course,
39
40 Christians insists that the appearance of these elements in his theory is a result of his
41
42 "research from thirteen (or twenty-seven, in my count) countries" and their "systematic
43
44 reflection" of them, and so it is. But it can be argued further that the reason, precisely,
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46 that these have garnered general acceptance among scholars and academics in the past
47
48 decades, despite Steiner's (2010) observation that there "never seemed much to go on"
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50 (111) in Christians's and Traber's relatively small study, is that their results speak to
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52 every human being's very core. Thus, its "intuitive appeal."
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3 *Internal support and explanatory power.* Indeed, the framework's wide acceptance in
4 the field of communication ethics and beyond, despite the apparent internal incoherence
5 among some parts of Christians's proposals, is indicative that perhaps not only human
6 intuition is involved here, but likewise what Timmons (2013) calls "considered moral
7 beliefs." In other words, Christians's framework passes muster in two other standards of
8 moral theory evaluation proposed by Timmons, namely "internal support" and
9 "explanatory power." A moral theory has "internal support" if its principles "together
10 with relevant factual information, logically imply our considered moral beliefs."
11 Conversely, "implications that conflict with our considered moral beliefs" among a
12 theory's principles are "evidence against the correctness of the theory" (14).

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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

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3 politics, especially as captured by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Lagon
4 and Arend 2014).

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8 *Adding the standard of coherence*

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10 Powerful and appealing as the elements and entirety of Christians's tri-level theory may
11 be, they will have to meet a standard for evaluating moral theory which I believe ought
12 to be added to the framework of Timmons, which is the standard of "coherence,"
13 defined in the Oxford Dictionary of English (OED) as "consistency in reasoning, or
14 relating, so that one part of the discourse does not destroy or contradict the rest"
15 (Stevenson and Soanes 2003). The coherence of Christians's theory as an entire system
16 ultimately appears to depend on its admission of the basic Aristotelian notions of
17 reason, objectivity and nature-as-essence. For example, a crucial underpinning of his
18 own theory of universal being – and indeed, the other theories of universal being that he
19 has cited in support of his own (Christians 2009, 281–87; 2019, 116–31) – is the fact
20 that human beings share an objective reality and a common nature or essence . From the
21 outset these two concepts undergird the concept of universals.
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38 These notions, moreover, together with the concept of reason, are also necessary
39 to defend the universal applicability of the proto-norms derived from his study,
40 considering that his research has a very limited sample and uses a methodology that
41 becomes problematic precisely when examined without the philosophical underpinnings
42 he has rejected. Even his claims to using a "philosophical anthropology" in building this
43 theory becomes dubious and unnecessarily convoluted with an *a priori* rejection of
44 these concepts. Plaisance (2013) has keenly observed that the "anthropological realism"
45 of Clifford Christians "implies a neo-Aristotelian orientation" (95). In fact, a deeper and
46 more mature look into Aristotle's approach would reveal that it is not incompatible with
47 the theory of Clifford Christians because Aristotelian "rationalism" is the opposite of
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3 Cartesian rationalism. The latter is immanentist, but the former is “realistic.” Since
4 these Aristotelian concepts are, in fact, the opposite of what Christians had described
5 them to be at the outset and compatible with his requirements for a contextualized, non-
6 absolutist and non-foundational ethical theory, the problem that provoked their rejection
7 or avoidance by Christians ought to be considered solved. *In fine*, for his entire theory to
8 be more coherent and become an authentically robust global ethics, rather than a thin
9 and minimalist ethics, Clifford Christians would need to incorporate properly
10 understood – i.e. reclaimed, recovered, extra-Cartesian – versions of crucial concepts
11 such as reason, objectivity, nature-as-essence, etc.
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24 ***Theoretical pluralism within a Christian worldview***

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

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54 This last aspect of Christians’s ambition for his global media ethics can only be
55 classified as noble. On the one hand it is refreshing to encounter a highly respected
56 scholar who has been consistently upfront about his faith and yet uses professional
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3 language instead of theological arguments to confront secular issues that endanger the
4
5 rightful place of faith or religion in the public square. On the other hand, the nobility of
6
7 Christians's religious inclusivity in his ethical theory lies in the context of the
8
9 enrichment of the field of ethics itself. Putting his own academic reputation on the line –
10
11 for example, in opposing the Hastings-Carnegie Study (Christians 2008c; 2008b) – he
12
13 cogently reasoned out that disregarding this kind of ethics is “to write off a huge influx
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15 of ethics from around the world” (Cortes 2016), and obviously to the disadvantage of
16
17 the field of ethics. Meanwhile, theological or religious ethics provide very meaningful
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19 responses to the problem of relativism in ethics (Christians 2010c) as well as to the
20
21 question of the holistic human being (Christians 2007b). Thus, their inclusion in the
22
23 conversation in ethics can only enhance ethical discussions. It is within the ambit of
24
25 such complex and rigorous requirements that Christians wishes to come up with an
26
27 ethics that is legitimately “international, cross-cultural, gender inclusive, and ethnically
28
29 diverse” yet at the same time non-relativist.
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35 He does this by building his theory from the ground up, which he does primarily
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37 through the research with Michael Traber. He likewise uses culturalism,
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39 communitarianism, and the philosophy of language as theoretical approaches. In the
40
41 same line, he rejects all forms of rationalism, formalism, and other similar principles
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43 found in divine-command theories since, being in his view exclusivist, foundationalist,
44
45 and absolutist, these are unacceptable in ethical discussions within the secular world.
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47 Christians is correct in using all these approaches to build this theory if the goal is to
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49 build one which is intellectually respectable in the secular field. However, his key flaw
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51 lies in not distinguishing Descartes' rationalism from Aristotle's realistic use of reason,
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53 and in consequently rejecting the key notions of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-
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55 essence. With this Christians unwittingly exposed his cultural and linguistic approaches
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3 to relativistic proclivities. Crafting a non-relativist global ethics by way of culture is
4
5 feasible only when one works within a presuppositional epistemology that human
6
7 beings across cultures share a certain nature or essence or, in his preferred term, “a
8
9 common humanity” (Christians, 2019, 30, 106, 119, etc.). This presupposition is
10
11 perfectly compatible with Christians’s “non-imperialist” approach, because it is not to
12
13 be imposed (non-absolutist) but rather proposed as something to be uncovered (non-
14
15 foundationalist) as a way of moving forward coherently. Likewise, a non-relativist
16
17 global ethics by way of language and hermeneutics is practicable only when one works
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19 with the presupposition that the roughly 6,500 spoken languages in the world do refer to
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21 a reality “out there,” i.e., an *objective* one, rather than reflect only individual or merely
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23 subjective realities.
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28 *Personalism as solution to individualism*

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30 On the topic of individualism, Christians’s understandable zeal to insulate his theory
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32 from this Enlightenment element has had the unfortunate effect of inducing the
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34 affirmation of the primacy of the community over the human person. This view,
35
36 however, uncovers the misunderstanding that, in affirming the primacy of the person,
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38 one necessarily has to either deny or minimize the importance of community, which is
39
40 the precise tendency of individualism. However, subordinating the person to the
41
42 community in order to preserve the theory from individualism is not only unnecessary
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44 but, in my opinion, a step in the wrong direction. I contend that the affirmation of
45
46 Christians threatens the coherence of his theory, both in the context of his ethics of
47
48 being that claims to highlight human dignity (and thus the dignity of the human person),
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50 and of his philosophy of technology that calls for a “technological responsibility,”
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52 necessarily demanding personal, moral agency. I propose that the way out of this
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54 dilemma can be addressed in two ways.
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3 The first is by considering the personalist framework of Wojtyla (2008a; 2008b;
4 2008c), which meets Christians's demands of a realist and holistically human
5 anthropology. Being an anthropology grounded on the principle of objective reality it
6 provides firmer ground for Christians's theory against relativism and subjectivism.
7
8 Wojtyla's emphasis on the importance of community is, in reality, parallel to
9
10 Christians's as demonstrated by the fact that, in describing the relationship between
11 person and community, the Polish philosopher first asserts that "the person should be
12 subordinate to society in all that is indispensable for the realization of the common
13 good." However, equally emphatically – and this is the part not as explicit in Christians
14 – he asserts that "this subordination may under no circumstances exclude and devalue
15 the persons themselves" (Wojtyla 2008c, 174). This personalist paradigm sees no
16 conflict between the individual human person and the interests of community because
17 "the true common good never threatens the good of the person, even though it may
18 demand considerable sacrifice of a person" (Wojtyla 2008c, 174).

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35 The second solution can be gleaned from Maritain (2014, 636), who makes a
36 fine distinction between the concepts of "individual" and "person," two notions that
37 Christians conflates. For Maritain, individuality is that which "excludes from oneself
38 all that other men are, (and) could be described as the narrowness of the ego, forever
39 threatened and forever eager to grasp for itself" (p. 431). Personality, however, is that
40 which "signifies interiority to self" yet at the same time "requires a dialogue in which
41 souls really communicate" (p. 433). In making this fine distinction, Maritain warns
42 against having to "misunderstand the distinction between the individual and the
43 person... (and) mistake it for a separation" (435). This same idea was echoed by
44 Oderberg (2009) as he distinguished between subjectivity and objectivity in the human
45 being without separating them. It can thus be argued from both a metaphysical and
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3 semantic sense that affirming the primacy of “the person” is quite different from
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5 affirming “the individual.” The former is “personalism,” which is conceptually, not just
6
7 semantically, distinct from the latter, which is “individualism.”
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10 Putting Wojtyla’s and Maritain’s arguments together makes it easier to modify
11
12 the articulation of the relationship between community and person from its present
13
14 dubious form – which threatens the coherence of Christians’s theory – to that which
15
16 firms up the centrality of his basic concepts. I propose that instead of an insistence that
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18 the community is axiologically and ontologically prior to the person, what ought to be
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20 affirmed is that the community is and ought to be axiologically and ontologically
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22 affirmed is that the community is and ought to be axiologically and ontologically
23
24 *attuned* to the person. This articulation highlights such a valuing of community that
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26 averts selfish egoism yet simultaneously affirms such a primacy of the human person
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28 that insulates the framework against the abuses of totalitarianism. I believe that, at root,
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30 this is what Christians wants for his theory.
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33 ***Virtue as response to technological “mystique”***

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35 Campbell (2010), who like Christians is involved in both communications and religious
36
37 studies, recognizes “the tendency of media to impose a distinctive value set on general
38
39 society.” She has acknowledged Christians’s role in highlighting this tendency by
40
41 “offering a general critique of technology from a media ethics and philosophy of
42
43 communication...using Ellul's understanding of technology as a basis for framing
44
45 debates about the impact of media technology on society” (95). This view of technology
46
47 beyond the instrumental, while clearly a key factor in significantly making Christians’s
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49 inclusion of technology in his ethical theory “original,” has been met with mixed
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51 reactions among communications scholars. In my view, both sides of the debate have
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53 offered plausible arguments which are not necessarily in conflict with each other.
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58 Christians’s view that technology is not a “*mere* instrument” does not preclude the
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3 affirmation that technology also *is* an instrument. In fact, this view may have the
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5 advantage of positioning us to take on a more “prudential” view of technology, not in
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7 the sense that it renders us wary in a conspiratorial or apocalyptic sense, but rather that
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9 it encourages a greater openness to the as-yet incompletely unexplored nature and
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11 effects of technology.
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15 However, the “requirement” demanded, as it were, of non-instrumentalism to
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17 view technology with “prudence,” only highlights the irony that Christians undervalues
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19 virtue ethics and the notion of extra-Cartesian reason in his technological framework.
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21 On the one hand, his claim that these are deficient has been refuted by highly triadic and
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23 virtue-based ethics systems such as those of Charles Ess (2014, 636) and Martha
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25 Nussbaum (1999), whom Christians himself esteems. On the other hand, Ellul (1964)
26
27 advises that the way to get out of “technological determinism” is through each person
28
29 practicing a sense of responsibility; becoming aware of the need to be responsible;
30
31 discerning, measuring, and analyzing the “determinisms that press on him” (xxxiii). It
32
33 can be argued, then, that the very main influence of Christians has argued, as it were,
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35 for the inclusion of virtue ethics and the properly understood notion of reason in
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37 strengthening Christians’s theory against critical arguments that attack his view of
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39 technology.
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44 **Conclusion: “are we there yet?”**

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46 Finally, we need to answer the important question posed near the beginning of this
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48 section: does his theory, in whole or in part, succeed as the way out of the “huge
49
50 challenge (of) amorality” (Christians, 2007a, 96) that threatens students and
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52 practitioners of communications in a technological age? The question subsumes several
53
54 other questions that refer to Christians’s goals for his theory, i.e., 1) to successfully
55
56 negotiate the twin perils of rationalism and relativism; 2) to be globally normative in a
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3 robust sense; 3) to take the whole human person seriously and in his or her proper
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5 context; and 4) to properly position itself for the technological complexity of the 21st
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7 century. The short answer is “not yet.”
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10 Christians’s inclusion of technology within his ethical framework not only
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12 makes his ethical theory a convincingly original one but also a truly promising media
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14 ethics theory for the “cybernetic age” that is the twenty-first century. Moreover, his
15
16 identification of the holistic human, sacredness of life, and other human realities, all of
17
18 which speak both intuitively and rationally to the human core as the main elements of
19
20 his ethical theory, places his theory in a very strong position as a plausible globally
21
22 normative ethic. However, as was argued,⁷ Christians has not addressed completely and
23
24 convincingly the problem of relativism in his theory.
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28 Christians (2009) is quite honest when he declares that his “global media
29
30 ethics... (opens) a pathway out of relativity that is intellectually credible” (288). In
31
32 other words, what Christians has spent his entire professional career on has been to
33
34 reconcile, for the communications professional, the demands of one’s individual
35
36 responsibility with those of working within a globalized communications environment.
37
38 Ultimately, this project reflects the tension between what Aristotle would call the
39
40 “concrete” and the “universal,” i.e. “concrete action” vis-à-vis “universal norms of
41
42 conduct.” Christians, moreover, has attempted to effect this reconciliation of realities
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44 seemingly at loggerheads with each other, in a manner that is acceptable to different
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46 philosophical persuasions. By constructing his theory “from the ground up,” using his
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55 ⁷ The interested reader is referred to the original work (Cortes 2019) for a more thorough
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57 discussion of the argument. Due to editorial limitations the arguments can be presented in this
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59 article only in very summarized form.
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3 research with Traber as basis, he could claim that his theory is “not imperialistic in
4 character” and thus reap the consequent intellectual credibility afforded by such an
5 approach in a secular field. In my view, as it is, his theory has indeed *opened* a path –
6 and this is a significant step – but not more. For him to convincingly claim that his
7 theory “(has) met the challenge for media ethics in a global age” (288), in the sense that
8 it has addressed the problem of moral relativism beyond reasonable doubt, he would
9 have to answer the issues that were raised in this article. These are issues that, in my
10 view, can only be persuasively addressed through the support of properly understood
11 concepts of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence.
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24 Christians (2008b) claims that his solution to the problem of relativism is
25 “ontology, an ethics of being” (10), but one which, according to his voluminous work,
26 does not explicitly recognize the proper role of human reason and its corollary concepts,
27 and indeed skirts them as much as possible or does away with them outright. This sort
28 of solution, I argue, is equivalent to intellectual sleight of hand. One would have to ask,
29 for example, what sort of “being” Christians is talking about. If his answer to the
30 question is his concept of “holistic being,” and by that he means “a being that is not
31 separated dichotomously into reason and the rest, subject and object, etc.,” then my
32 reply would be that this concept of “being” is perfectly compatible with the “reinforced”
33 original and non-Cartesian notions of reason, objectivity, and nature-as-essence that, I
34 argue, are crucial – even necessary – concepts in confronting relativism.
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49 Indeed, although Christians has attempted to provide an “ontological”
50 foundation to his concept of human dignity, I submit that his version of this foundation
51 is rather generic and, consequently, weak. That Christians has not successfully gotten
52 rid of relativism is shown by the fact that he has ended up resorting to what appears to
53 be only intellectual hairsplitting as regards “cultural relativism” and “moral relativism.”
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3 In this, he pursues the following rather tortured mental process: first, assert that
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5 “cultural relativism” and “moral relativism” are distinct, albeit contrary to the
6
7 affirmations of the culturalist tradition itself; then, in what appears to be a surrender to
8
9 relativism, accept “cultural relativism,” but with the caveat of doing so only “in the
10
11 epistemological sense” (Christians 2011a, 32); finally, affirm that “moral relativism is
12
13 rejected at the same time” (Christians, 2009, 288). As a victory over relativism, this
14
15 questionable line of argument is hardly convincing. It is not convincing because it is
16
17 unnecessarily complicated rather than intellectually sophisticated. The upshot of this
18
19 dubious victory against relativism is that the theory of Christians as a globally
20
21 normative ethic would be at best a thin and minimalist ethic rather than the robust ethic
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23 that he claims his theory is or, at least, he wants it to be.

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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. 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 ostensible 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 priori* 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

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3 against relativism and towards legitimate global claims. I posit that these concepts meet
4 the criteria that Christians correctly identifies for a theory like his that seeks to be
5 acceptable across cultures. They are open to context, dialogue, and construction.
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10 The second intellectual disposition that threatens the coherence of Christian's
11 theory is an insistence that the community is prior to the person both in value and being.
12 This consistent assertion imperils the coherence of his theory for several reasons. First,
13 it is in conflict with his own concept of communitarianism and reduces, as it were, the
14 "quality" of the contexts that he requires for his "humancentric" ethical theory. Second,
15 it is historically compromised because this articulation of community vis-à-vis the
16 person has been identified with that sort of totalitarianism that Christians himself has
17 expressly rejected for any concept in his theory. Third, given the innumerable abuses
18 that have been committed against human persons and their legitimate rights in the name
19 of "community" this affirmation weakens his proto-norms of human dignity, sacredness
20 of life, truth, nonviolence and cosmopolitan justice. Ironically, in an explanation of the
21 thoughts of an unabashedly person-centric author, Christian Smith, Christians (2015a)
22 has written: "A theory of personhood centered on intrinsic human worth opens a
23 pathway between the extremes of positivism and relativism and serves as a model for
24 working with the concept of justice in a global society" (52). If one takes these words
25 seriously at face value, and draws from them their ultimate consequences, one would
26 come to the inevitable conclusion that Clifford Christians himself has already written a
27 clear affirmation of the primacy of the person that doesn't endorse individualism but
28 rather promotes community. Indeed, Christians may have already begun, perhaps
29 unwittingly, the journey towards the proper articulation of the relationship between
30 person and community, which is the reverse of what he has been defending all along.
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3 Such an articulation would decisively strengthen the coherence of his theory and cement
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5 the centrality of his proto-norms.
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8 In summary, this article affirms that Christians's theory shows great promise as
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10 a "way out" of the moral indifference which has become common coin among students
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12 and practitioners of media and communications in our cybernetic age yet poses a great
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14 threat to them. The theory's key strengths are a provocative philosophy of technology
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16 strategically included its framework and its identification as a humancentric ethics of
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18 being, which speaks to what is authentically human. Moreover, the chances that this
19
20 theory's "great promise" will be brought to fulfillment will improve upon its admission
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22 of the enhanced paradigm of Aristotelian concepts elaborated in this article and the
23
24 correct articulation of the link between person and community that captures their true
25
26 relationship.
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