

SHOP CLASS AS SOULCRAFT: AN INQUIRY INTO THE VALUE OF WORK

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This is not a book about how you can make more money as a plumber than by going to law school. It is, rather, a book of philosophy, revolving around thoughts on alienation, self-reliance, and what we owe to others. I found it to be both a bit rambling and unexpectedly deep—it manages to connect the thoughts of Marx with those of Aristotle, and it combines practical thoughts on how one should earn one’s bread with advice for living a whole life. The net effect is worthwhile, though not earthshattering.

The project of the author, Matthew Crawford, is to argue for the value of work “that is meaningful because it is genuinely useful.” Although the manual trades exemplify centering your life around meaningful work, such work is not confined to someone employed in the manual trades. Any time we rely on our own efforts with real things and are “master of our own stuff,” we exemplify self-reliance, which is a form of individual agency and creates meaning. Not doing genuinely useful work and not relying on yourself lead to lack of agency, which means alienation, and is at the root of much modern angst. And since many, if not most, modern workplaces exemplify both no useful work, or no obviously useful work, and the opposite of self-reliance, it is no wonder that many people find themselves unfulfilled—lost in a dark wood, as it were.

A fair bit of this book is autobiography, and Crawford has had an interesting path. He was raised for some years in a commune, and started work early as an electrician, while also developing an interest in motor engines. Then he detoured into getting a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago; declined an academic career; did some (unfulfilling) think tank work; and now primarily works as a motorcycle mechanic. I found Crawford’s background and his ideas particularly resonant, because his career path has some similarities to mine (though only in the generalities). As I outline in more detail in my review of Joan Williams’s *White Working Class*, I went from being a corporate lawyer at a giant law firm to being a finish carpenter, and from there to owning

and operating a light industrial business, which has been extremely successful, such that I am now left with money and time. With that time, I am (among other things), taking up metalworking (lathes, mills, and so forth). Therefore, I understand, and agree with, some of Crawford's points more viscerally than I might if, say, I had only ever been a lawyer.

Crawford starts simply, discussing the relatively narrow subject of shop class—or, more broadly, the “useful arts.” Shop class is dying, or being killed, of course, and Crawford thinks that is a tragedy. Manual work is psychically satisfying. It is also often cognitively demanding, more so than, say, management consulting, because it can't be reduced to abstract rules that can be mechanically and universally applied to all situations. Accumulated knowledge of reality, wisdom, is what makes a manual craftsman good at his work. (Crawford grants that not all manual labor is true “craft,” but uses the terms mostly interchangeably, while adding a few snarky words about people who are overly hung up on curly maple or Japanese swords.) Moreover, manual work has a social element frequently missing in office work—the craftsman is embedded in a larger set of communities, including other workers, customers, other small businesspeople, and so forth. And, aside from these benefits, manual work, the majority of which that still remains can't be outsourced, is simply often today a better economic bet than much professional-managerial work. Unfortunately, too often manual work is looked down on, and in fact much manual work was, beginning in the early twentieth century, robbed of its satisfactions by attempts to abstract its performance from the material at hand.

So far, this is only modestly philosophical. Next, Crawford draws the history of how, in the early twentieth century, those in charge of business made concerted efforts to separate thinking from doing, thereby severing much of the psychic, cognitive, and social benefits of manual work from the worker himself. Crawford does not deny this may be efficient, in the sense of maximizing output, but it degrades the worker and the workforce, and is ultimately deleterious to society on all levels. Taylorism comes in for a good deal of criticism; Marx for some limited praise. As Crawford points out, Taylorism is less about time than it is about cost—that is, paying the laborer the least possible per unit of output, by reducing reliance on skilled workers. Yes, Henry Ford doubled pay—because he had to, since his assembly line work was so

unpleasant. And the caliber of the workers paid, their skills and their intelligence, dropped. Today, the same process occurs among wide swathes of white-collar workers—it is not true that we have a “creative class” because minimum wage workers at Best Buy are praised for offering suggestions. They, and most employees, are instead degraded wage slaves, who are alienated from their labor, the fruits of which they cannot even see or apprehend, but which in any case go to others. And although Taylor doesn’t mention it (this book was published in 2009), artificial intelligence threatens to further continue this process (although I don’t believe AI will ever fulfil its supposed promise, in any other than the narrowest areas, and probably not even there).

Given that “work is toilsome and necessarily serves someone else’s interests—that’s why you get paid,” we should aim not at silly vaporous beliefs like Best Buy workers being “creative,” but at goals “that avoid utopianism while keeping an eye on the human good: work that engages the human capacities as fully as possible.” We should not “partition thinking from doing.” Yes, some people should be employed as thinkers, since we need thinkers in some positions, after all, and some people are best suited to be thinkers, although most “knowledge workers” are nothing of the sort. But there is wide scope still for non-routinized manual work, and the young should be encouraged to evaluate those alternatives. If you choose manual work, “One feels like a man, not a cog in a machine. The trades are [therefore] a natural home for anyone who would live by his own powers, free not only of deadening abstraction but also of insidious hopes and rising insecurities that seem to be endemic in our current economic life.” It will be better for them and for society.

The next few chapters work out this set of philosophies, both of themselves and in opposition to certain dominant modern philosophies. As to the opposition, first, as Crawford points out explicitly, craft is a challenge to consumerism—the ethic of continual discarding while in constant pursuit of new, usually junky, products produced by others. A craft approach views objects as valuable—to be repaired, if possible, rather than simply discarded—and the craftsman creates objects as best he can for their own sake, and his own sake, with an eye to permanence, which creates real “self-esteem” for the craftsman, not the fake self-esteem offered to students today. Second, and related, craft is focused on the pursuit of excellence. Talent, experience, and skill are objectively

measurable in their results and they mean that some people are better at what they do than others. "The lover of excellence is prone to being drawn out of himself . . . in a way that the universalist egalitarian is not." Along the same lines, craft requires judgment in its exercise, and "the necessity of such judgment calls forth human excellence."

In addition to opposing consumerism and exalting excellence, the manual arts also oppose the modern tendencies toward unreality and autonomic individualism. Craft pays homage to reality and to an understanding of the world as it is, and rejects artificiality and ideological distortions of the world. "[W]hat it means to be a good mechanic is that you have a keen sense that you answer to something that is the opposite of personal or idiosyncratic; something universal. . . . There is an underlying fact: a sheared-off pin has blocked an oil gallery, resulting in starvation to the head and excessive heat, causing the seizures. This is the Truth, and it is the same for everyone." This is certainly true, but today when reality is not fashionable and the existence of excellence, much less its importance as a goal, is denied, you can see how manual labor is necessarily subversive of modernity, even reactionary, from its very nature. Which is probably one reason why it is denigrated by our ruling classes.

Fourth, the manual arts are inherently opposed to autonomic individualism and to a belief that what matters is emancipation from limits. Engines and metal have limits that are real; they do not care who you are and you must bend to their rules. At the same time, though, Crawford emphasizes self-reliance, which seems on the surface to be linked to increasing autonomy. We must each be "master of our own stuff" if we are to have agency. Cars that lack dipsticks and computer interfaces meant to be "intuitive," that is, to prevent any thought on the part of the user, make us dependent, rather than self-reliant. Yes, there can be countervailing benefits, but we tend to exaggerate those and gloss over the costs. Here Crawford notes a subtle and important point—we may be less self-reliant by not being masters of our own stuff, but we get in return more autonomy, the ability to use our tools for precisely the purposes we choose, unfettered by having to deal with the reality of those tools. At the same time, we get less agency. As with a musician who must practice and obey the mechanical reality of an instrument and of musical tones whose "facts do not arise from the human will,

and there is no altering them,” “the basic character of human agency [is that] it arises only within concrete limits that are not of our making.” The fewer limits, paradoxically, the less agency, the less self-reliance, and the more autonomy.

Seeing that self-reliance itself also implies, at first glance, more autonomy, Crawford goes to some effort to distinguish his call for self-reliance from a call for unfettered, atomistic freedom of the individual. “The kind of self-reliance I have in mind is essentially different from the cult of the sovereign self, and it requires some further reflection on the idea of agency.” By agency, he means not action directed by the will of the self, but “activity directed toward some end that is affirmed as good by the actor, but this affirmation is not something arbitrary and private. Rather, it flows from an apprehension of real features of the world. . . . [The manual worker’s] individuality is not only compatible with, it is realized through his efforts to reach a goal that is common. His individuality is thus expressed in an activity that, in answering a shared world, connects him to others. . . . Such a social individuality contrasts with the self-enclosure that is implicit in the idea of ‘autonomy,’ which means giving a law to oneself. The idea of autonomy denies that we are born into a world that existed prior to us. It posits an essential aloneness; an autonomous being is free in the sense that a being severed from all others is free. To regard oneself this way is to betray the natural debts we owe the world, and commit the moral error of ingratitude.” This is, of course, merely a straightforward application of the universal Western view of freedom from Aristotle until the Enlightenment—that liberty is the ability of each person to choose virtue and self-rule. Crawford’s self-reliance is a bound self-reliance, embedded in a larger society; it is the very opposite of the self-reliance of Robinson Crusoe, or of a man adrift in an ocean of liquid modernity.

As you can see from all this, many of Crawford’s philosophical points overlap. I found that his arguments often felt a bit rambling—not wrong, but not totally crisp. I am not sure if that is a fault in my perception or a fault in his writing. In any case, Crawford intermittently returns to more robust autobiography, talking about how he became educated, in particular through discovery of his own dispositions—a real form of “diversity.” He offers a number of interesting insights, including (in the context of understanding an engine rebuild), after being educated

by someone with more experience, “It is an uncanny experience; the raw sensual data reaching my eye before and after are the same, but without the pertinent framework of meaning, the features in question are invisible.” The mechanical arts therefore reward attentiveness, less so than creativity—but we are always told how important creativity is, in every context, and attentiveness is denigrated.

Crawford then pivots to an analysis of cubicle labor, noting, for example, that “Corporations portray themselves as results-based and performance-oriented,” but that’s mostly a lie, and wholly a lie in comparison to the objective performance found in the mechanical arts. More broadly, office work focuses on teamwork, the manual trades on individual responsibility (sometimes in the form of a crew—where there is a hierarchy of both authority and competency), which again leads to a reality-based search for excellence. I agree with this—teamwork, so exalted in business school and by mediocre businessmen, is a complete waste of time, except in the context of having a team leader who hands out orders to subordinates, as in the military. The reality is that nearly all true, egalitarian, teams in any business context are composed of a toxic brew of free-riding and lowest-common-denominator behavior, a race to plumb the bottom of the Sea of Competency. Which is why egalitarian teams are not found in high-performing businesses (even if their leaders pay lip service to the idea). Far better, says Crawford, to have individual competency and responsibility harnessed to a common goal. The workplace needs “a concrete task that rules the job—an autonomous good that is visible to all.” That white-collar workplaces usually lack such a task is one reason why management devolves into therapy, speech is regulated, and sensitivity is everything, because there is no objective standard of excellence.

It is, I think, important to note that while Crawford nowhere adverts to it, this is really a book directed at men. Shop class, when it existed, was almost exclusively male, and this is rooted in biological reality—that men are, on average, much more interested in manual work than are women. The equivalent of shop class for women was “home economics,” and women selected that at similar rates to men selecting shop class. Shop class and the mechanical arts revolve around typically masculine traits, such as problem solving, competition, and objectively demonstrating competency and prowess, and they often involve danger (all

the most dangerous trades are utterly dominated by men). Self-reliance itself, in fact, is much more a masculine aspiration than a feminine aspiration. Home economics revolves around feminine traits, such as nurturing and empathy. Nor was it some form of discrimination that created these differences between the trades and home economics—as has been proven time and time again, most notably in the “progressive” Scandinavian countries, when women are given totally free career choices, they gravitate more to traditionally female activities. This underlying reality is obvious between the lines in this book—Crawford refers nearly exclusively to men, in phrasing, anecdotes, and use of generic pronouns. Many women might find this book interesting on a philosophical level, and a few might find it useful to their lives, but in practice, this book’s audience is men.

The book could have addressed numerous related issues, though of course an author has to draw the line somewhere. For example, Crawford mostly ignores issues such as class, which to some people would loom as the most important matter relating to the manual arts. He does not much address the simple dignity of manual craft labor, as opposed to the false “dignity” exalted recently by our Supreme Court and our other moral betters. And he barely mentions manual work that is repetitive factory work with no aspect of “mechanical art” or craft; his arguments apply much less to such work, but he does not dwell on the distinction and its implications. Certainly, line workers in my own factory, who start at thirteen dollars an hour (considered a good starting wage for unskilled labor), may experience less alienation than an office worker, but they also don’t experience the same psychic and social benefits, or self-reliance and agency, that a motorcycle mechanic does. Distinguishing, therefore, among types of manual labor seems like an important task if one is actually considering adopting manual work as a job.

Ultimately, as I say, *Shop Class as Soulcraft* is bit rambling for my taste. It’s not that it meanders, but it does stroll, among its topics, with quite a few asides. Thus, the end result hangs together, but it’s hard to parse sometimes, since it doesn’t have a strong frame. The reader therefore feels like he’s learned something, and advanced his thought, but it’s more holistic than specific. On the other hand, perhaps that’s the intent—“soulcraft,” after all, sounds pretty holistic. Either way, the reader does benefit from the book, and it raises important philosophical

and practical questions that, especially for young people, bear thinking about.