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# On Why a Tool Belt Belongs in a Backpack

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**Matthew B. Crawford**, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

In *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, Matthew Crawford presents a case for the value of manual labor in a world shaped increasingly by information technologies, social media, and other engines of abstraction. The case turns on what ought to be an obvious point, but it is one that arrives in the context of the contemporary culture like a subversive idea: because it calls on the full engagement of body and soul and requires us to conform ourselves self-forgetfully to an objective reality that resists our attempts to subjugate it, manual labor offers the opportunity for both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world; it allows us to achieve something of value that is indisputably real; and it brings us into a community of those who appreciate this value and understand the quality of work required to bring it into being. In short, working with our hands at something good, true, and beautiful helps us to recall what it means to be genuinely human, against the current of a culture that is rolling relentlessly into the “trans” future. Crawford believes that there is a growing openness to his proposal: “We worry that we are becoming stupider, and begin to wonder if getting an adequate *grasp* on the world, intellectually depends on getting a handle on it in a liberal and active sense” (7).

At the heart of Crawford’s case lies a distinction between *freedom* and *agency*. (One might take issue with Crawford’s concession of the name “freedom” to what turns out to be a severely impoverished form of the reality, but this is primarily a semantic point.) The former Crawford identifies as the cultural ideal of liberation from burdens and limitations of various sorts (the essentially negative concept of “freedom *from*”), while the latter represents the more classical notion of formed capacity, the positive ability to accomplish some particular act (“freedom *for*”), which can be acquired only through training and patient practice—that is, through *work*. While at a superficial level, these two may seem similar, insofar as they both betoken a certain kind of power, at a deeper level they prove to be virtually opposed. The acquisition of agency requires *submission* in at least two forms: first, there is the deferential entrusting of oneself to an authority in the matter who has undergone the training himself (an apprenticeship to a mentor) and, more fundamentally, there is one’s unavoidable subjection to the objective reality of the thing on which one works: “to be master of your own stuff entails also being mastered by it” (57). It is *in* and *through* dependence that one achieves a kind of independence, a confidence in one’s ability, which opens up the material world and makes it familiar and accessible.

The precise opposite occurs in the pursuit of “freedom,” understood in the prevailing negative sense of the term. Here, the goal is precisely to “disburden” oneself as far as possible, to figure out the most effective means of producing results at the least cost in terms of human effort, labor, and responsibility. Crawford describes the pursuit of this goal in the realm of work as a progressive “separation of thinking from doing” (37–53) that occurred through the various revolutions in industry, economics, and

technology. Perhaps the most significant of these in relation to the particular problem of agency is the radical division of labor that was systematically implemented in the twentieth century to produce an inconceivably vast amount of “goods” precisely by shrinking the qualitative content of work. The “intellectual” activities of planning, management, marketing, sales, and so forth, have been parceled out from the actual production of real things, which itself has been broken down into uninteresting bits. The result is the juxtaposition of a kind of thinking that has grown abstract and ineffectual and a kind of doing that has ceased to engage the mind. Neither is adequate to a dignified existence; work in the authentically human sense that involves the whole person in the bringing into being of something real and good has all but disappeared.

There is a terrible irony in this pursuit of “freedom,” the evidence of which has become increasingly hard to deny: the very power that such developments have enabled us to achieve, because it occurs by means of an elimination of dependence *and therefore of genuine human connection with reality*, turns out to be merely the flipside of impotence. This impotence appears in the mass of unskilled labor, and laborless—*fruit-less*—skill that constitutes an increasing proportion of the workforce. But we also find it in the passivity that is constantly reinforced on the consumption end of the transaction. On the one hand, we are learning, like no other people before us, to use and enjoy things with little personal involvement with their reality, and on the other hand we are becoming increasingly defenseless against the insidious designs of the market.

Crawford is especially good at unmasking the manipulation at work in prominent cultural phenomena that present themselves as enhancements of freedom and control, and assessing the deep implications of what might otherwise appear trivial:

One of the hottest things at the shopping mall right now is a store called Build-a-Bear, where children are said to make their own teddy bears. I went into one of these stores, and it turns out that what the kid actually does is select the features and clothes for the bear on a computer screen, then the bear is made for him. Some entity has leaped in ahead of us and taken care of things already, with a kind of solicitude. The effect is to preempt cultivation of embodied agency, the sort that is natural to us. . . . Children so preempted will be more well adjusted to emerging patterns of work and consumption. (69)

According to Crawford, a straightforward sign of our being collectively caught in this cultural drift is the disappearance of shop class from high school curricula. It is assumed, apparently, that only “white-collar” work, separated from a hands-on engagement with material things, carries dignity and represents “success.” But the realization that working at a desk does not guarantee working with one’s mind is growing, so much so that it has become a recognizable theme in popular culture: witness the TV show “The Office,” or the comic strip “Dilbert.” We are getting lost in empty abstractions. A simple way to put up some resistance to this drift is to exercise agency and to deepen our sense of the value of what countless generations have taken for granted. The classical tradition, for one, considered the hands the bodily expression of intelligence, and therefore understood work as a way of knowing the world. Students need to be introduced to this insight. A program of education centered on mentorship in forms of human work is indispensable in this regard. The “kind of thinking” entailed in manual labor “offers a counterweight to the culture of narcissism” (102). We rise to this sort of thinking when we learn to embrace the patient effort, and the personal attention, inevitably required to do something that is *real*.

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