

## ***Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*** **by Matthew B. Crawford**

Penguin, 2009. 246 pages.

Reviewed by David W. Gill [www.ethixbiz.com](http://www.ethixbiz.com)

Matthew Crawford (a Berkeley High School and UCSB grad) earned a Ph.D. in political philosophy at the University of Chicago and landed a job as Executive Director of a Washington think tank. But as he says “I was always tired, and honestly could not see the rationale for my being paid at all --- what tangible goods or useful services was I providing to anyone? This sense of uselessness was dispiriting. The pay was good. But it truly felt like *compensation* and after five months I quit to open the bike shop” (pp. 4-5).

*Shop Class as Soul Craft* has been on the best seller list (one hopeful sign amid the detritus, lies, and poison on that same list. You know what I mean) and is obviously ringing a chord with many people. It is a great book --- actually pretty philosophical for a best-selling work, personal, engaging, and interesting, challenging the conventional wisdom and culture in some very important ways. Well-written. Quotable. Crawford’s descriptions of his own various work experiences as an abstract writer for an academic press (zzzzzzz), a mechanic, electrician, and think tank director are often funny, always insightful.

The first thing to be said is how important it is for each of us to find our own vocation (“calling”) in life. I often say that I myself was “a product of mass counseling techniques” that led me to enroll at Berkeley as a freshman engineering major. It took me a while but I wound up a writer and teacher --- and eventually circled around to a special interest in teaching and writing about the ethics of technology. So it was interesting to read of Crawford moving from philosopher and think tank --- to blue collar mechanic --- and then circle around to thoughtful lay philosopher of blue collar work. He (and we) find a lack of satisfaction and meaning until we truly find our calling. We’ve got to get the pieces in the right places. His discontent was not entirely built into the work of a political philosopher or think tank director per se: he was not “called” to spend his own life that way. Other people are.

But at a deeper level, Crawford is on to the importance of manual labor, especially the making and repairing of things with our own hands. For him it is motorcycles; for others it may be painting, woodworking, cooking, farming, or something else. We are physical, embodied creatures: to work only in the realm of ideas, intellectual capital, and virtual reality, is ultimately a dangerous and soul-withering experience. The dropping of shop class as a curricular requirement in junior and senior high schools is symptomatic of the problem. “In California, three-quarters of high school shop programs have disappeared since the early 1980s” (p.11).

Crawford points out how Frederick Winslow Taylor’s influential *Principles of Scientific Management* (1915) argued for removing thinking from manual labor – turning it into a dehumanizing mechanical process. And on the other side Crawford is merciless in unmasking a lot of the creativity/innovation talk about white collar work --- showing that such creativity is invited and allowed only within careful circumscribed boundaries. Thus, “Even if you *do* go to college, learn a trade in the summers. You’re likely to be less damaged, and quite possibly better paid, as an independent tradesman than as a cubicle-dwelling tender of information systems or low-level ‘creative’” (p. 53).

Crawford has important questions to raise about the way today’s automobiles and other machines are designed to be impenetrable to ordinary people (in contrast to when we all used to work on our cars or take apart our radios and try to fix them). He talks about the essential discipline of learning a language or a music instrument as a model of meaningful work. His discussion of “internal goods” (the intrinsic value of something) and “external goods” (roughly, the compensation from others for having done something) is very interesting. Crawford highlights the importance of learning by doing (not just by listening or disembodied thinking), of making mistakes, of accountability for our actions, and of solidarity with others.

Crawford's book is packed with interesting comments and observations: "Perhaps most surprisingly, I often find manual work more engaging *intellectually*" (p. 5). "If the modern personality is being reorganized on a predicate of passive consumption, this is bound to affect our political culture" (p. 18). "I believe the mechanical arts have a special significance for our time because they cultivate not creativity, but the less glamorous virtue of attentiveness. Things need fixing and tending no less than creating" (p. 82). "In the last thirty years American businesses have shifted their focus from the production of goods (now done elsewhere) to the production of brands, that is, states of mind in the consumer" (p. 126).

In the end, *Shop Class* does not mean we all need to go get blue collar jobs. I do think its truth means we all need to roll up our sleeves pretty regularly and make or repair something concrete. There is something incredibly attractive to me about being a hands-on pianist (and teacher) like my daughter – or a hands-on personal trainer (and fitness club owner) like my son. Actually I tend to think I'd be a carpenter, wine-maker, or chef if I went that hand-craft direction. Those directions have not been my calling; I'm a writer and a teacher and an organizer. But my life would be horribly imbalanced and impossible if for all these years I hadn't also gotten my hands in the garden, done my home handyman remodel projects with my wife, and insisted on being an amateur cook for many of our house guests. And I do thank God for my shop classes in junior high, for my dad leading me to the lumber yard and then crawling under the house on some Saturday project when I was a kid, and for my mom leading me into the kitchen. And thank you Matthew Crawford for reminding us of this critically-important side of life.