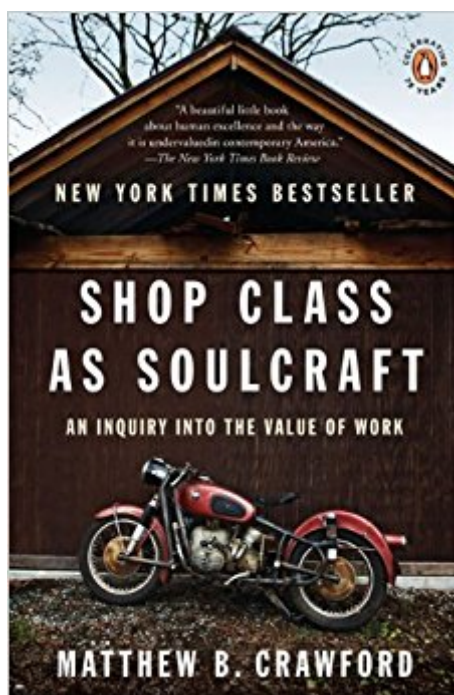


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# Shop Class As Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into The Value Of Work



## Synopsis

A philosopher/mechanic's wise (and sometimes funny) look at the challenges and pleasures of working with one's hands. Called "the sleeper hit of the publishing season" (The Boston Globe), *Shop Class as Soulcraft* became an instant bestseller, attracting readers with its radical (and timely) reappraisal of the merits of skilled manual labor. On both economic and psychological grounds, author Matthew B. Crawford questions the educational imperative of turning everyone into a "knowledge worker," based on a misguided separation of thinking from doing. Using his own experience as an electrician and mechanic, Crawford presents a wonderfully articulated call for self-reliance and a moving reflection on how we can live concretely in an ever more abstract world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Philosopher and motorcycle repair-shop owner Crawford extols the value of making and fixing things in this masterful paean to what he calls manual competence, the ability to work with one's hands. According to the author, our alienation from how our possessions are made and how they work takes many forms: the decline of shop class, the design of goods whose workings cannot be accessed by users (such as recent Mercedes models built without oil dipsticks) and the general disdain with which we regard the trades in our emerging information economy. Unlike today's knowledge worker, whose work is often so abstract that standards of excellence cannot exist in many fields (consider corporate executives awarded bonuses as their companies sink into bankruptcy), the person who works with his or her hands submits to standards inherent in the work itself: the lights either turn on or they don't, the toilet flushes or it doesn't, the

motorcycle roars or sputters. With wit and humor, the author deftly mixes the details of his own experience as a tradesman and then proprietor of a motorcycle repair shop with more philosophical considerations. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

We note that Publishers Weekly named Shop Class as Soulcraft one of the top ten books of 2009. Reviewers were clearly intrigued by Crawford's argument, but only a couple of them seemed fully persuaded. (The New York Times Book Review critic, for example, admitted to enjoying Crawford's manual work alongside his academic career.) But most critics, while praising the book's overall premise, seemed a little hesitant about fully embracing Shop Class as Soulcraft, perhaps because, as the New York Times reviewer observed, many of the author's personal preferences and quirks, such as Crawford's defense of dirty jokes, seem to impede his argument. However, it's hard not to be interested in a philosopher who, in a nation that privileges intellectual attainment, can also successfully replace a carburetor. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Overall a good audio book, good subject but the writer "tried too hard to sound smart" - If he knew the audience as well as his comprehensive ability to write intelligently on the subject he could have avoided the trying to sound smart language. Beyond that criticism, the gist of his core message is well conveyed and a worthwhile read/listen for those with an interest.

The author has a bit of reactionary constipation combined with pretentiousness that is hard to take but I still give 3 stars because some of what he says still rings true. We do not value craft or the trades and the skills that they require, and an emphasis on consumerism, which is the core of capitalism, devalues fixing things and even making things.

I very much enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it. I like the overall depth of philosophical commentary and the overarching theme of finding the "good" in life and the need to devise an individual pathway that allows one to flourish - sounds a bit like existentialism. I also admire the author's iconoclasm, and his willingness to question the consensus and reject it, if the consensus is not justified or deserving. However, the black-and-white argument of working class versus educated class does not work. A working class position is not a guarantee to job satisfaction and fulfillment. It is much more complex than that. Although Crawford briefly recognizes this in his

summary at the end of the book, this is surely the theme that is being promoted in the title and in the marketing of the book. He hits the nail on the head on page 100 when he states that "Any discipline that deals with authoritative, independent reality requires honest and humility". This requirement is key in our work environment and should pertain to all endeavors, not just working class, hands-on positions. I am a scientist involved in medical product development. Honesty and humility are absolute necessities (tautology intended) in that field. When they are lacking, producing a good product is near impossible.

Mathew Crawford is a smart and sophisticated intellectual but his personal work with repairing older model motorcycles gives him one foot in the traditionally blue collar world of physically making and repairing real things and one foot in the world of analysis and theory of how the world works. This book is his calm and steady reflection on the importance of craftsmanship in our world. It is a polite and powerful response to a world that is focused on short term goals using virtual things like email and software. One of my favorite ideas is page 16, early in the book: "A washing machine, for example, surely exists to serve our needs, but in contending with one that is broken, you have to ask what *it* needs." In the world of computing in which I work, one encounters many engineers who feel as sense of control over their machines. They think they can make the machine do what they want by brute force of faster CPUs or more disk drives. But the small community of engineers focused on achieving high performance benchmark understands it as Crawford does: You have to understand how the computer works and what the machine needs in order to operate smoothly, at maximum performance without bottleneck or fault. Only then can you provide it with software tailored to its particular style of operation and meet your goals. As you can see, I don't repair motorcycles, but I'm using the inspiration of this book's ideas on my own life. I highly recommend it to others.

1. This book is a reaction against the notion that all future jobs will be tied to a virtual world of work. We live in a physical reality of structures, equipment, machinery, tools, and this book makes a strong case for the value of making and fixing things. In particular, Crawford points out that many jobs will be outsourced overseas because knowledge industries are just as easily fostered, often more cheaply, in Asia where children and teens can and do learn math and sciences. But, you can not ship overseas the repair of physical things, including bridges or bodies and the infrastructure that makes up society. 2. He traces the cultural history in the West that has led to the prestigious status of knowledge-based jobs over manual-based jobs, and the general manual dis-engagement

of work. He speaks with some authority because he traded in his PhD in philosophy and academic career to become a full-time motorcycle repair mechanic.<sup>3</sup> Crawford explains why he finds manual work more intellectually stimulating more meaningful (because it is more useful) and, in so doing, builds a case for young adults to seriously consider the trades and crafts careers. Real knowledge, he argues, arises through confrontations with real things.<sup>4</sup> He advances the notion of individual agency, the power to do things, not just think about them, or bypass them by purchasing a product. He suggests that most knowledge work is organized around a process of depersonalization, where a worker is usually answerable to a force not situated at the site of the work. By contrast, the work of skilled tradespeople is direct engagement with a process and product, where accountability is taken at the site of work.<sup>5</sup> In his conclusion, Crawford argues that more self-employment and self-reliance actually increases community because it increases our dependence on each other in the marketplace, rather than having our economic relations mediated by impersonal forces that further separate us from our labor and its produce. As a solo-preneur, I relate to this idea because, while I enjoy a certain amount of freedom and flexibility in my work, I am completely dependent on a supply of clients through market forces who keep me directly accountable for what I do. Good stuff! It demonstrates for me the importance of getting a deep analysis of your natural inclinations as a young adult. Rather than succumb to social conditioning, we can make decisions based on our innate talents and motivations

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