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Classicism in Matthew Crawford’s Shop Class as Soulcraft

Jessica Horohov*

The debate over the purpose of education has long been between philosophical ideals and economic realities. Caroline Winterer describes, in The Culture of Classicism (2004), the historical tension between the public’s concerns over higher education’s utility in the job market and classical scholars’ desire to preserve classical education through the liberal arts. The history of classicism in education is defended as it has “bestowed something higher than vocational or exclusively scientific preparation: it offered culture” (Winterer, 2004, p. 110). Yet is not this definition of classicism being “higher” than vocational studies biased? For the counterpoint, I turned to Matthew Crawford’s Shop Class as Soulcraft (2009), a book written by a classically-trained motorcycle mechanic in defense of the vocational arts, but in the end, found a similar romanticism over the place of tradition in modern times.

Crawford’s aim for his book to “rehabilitate the honor of the trades, as being choice-worthy work,” arguing for technical work’s ability to provide a fulfilling life as well as any white-collar or academic career—and perhaps better (2009, p. 6). What he is up against is the distinction between liberal and vocational education. As he describes it, “One of the earliest uses of the word ‘liberal’ was to draw a distinction between the ‘liberal arts’ and the ‘servile arts.’ The former were those pursuits befitting a free man, while the latter were identified with the mechanical arts” (Crawford, 2009, p. 109). Crawford describes how today’s education has become divided between specific skill sets and general education. Today’s capitalist organizations demand that “the educational regime that aims to supply those institutions with suitable workers—pliable generalists unfettered by any single set of skills” (Crawford, 2009, p. 19). This tendency towards general studies can be found within classicism, where studying texts in the original languages was a full education in morality and statesmanship through the Greek and Roman examples. Winterer (2004) also sets up classical education in opposition to vocation, describing how “the anticlassicism of the Victorian era marched under the banner of science and utility” (p. 105). As scientific innovations were growing and the discipline itself started to move into the realm of institutionalized higher education, classicism lost favor in a society that started to value the future rather than the past. Winterer quotes Grimké, saying that education must be “adapted to our peculiar character, circumstances, and destiny” (p. 48). This sentiment was followed by the Dewey progressive education era, when the emphasis was on experience in education rather than classical rote knowledge.

It is in this modern division between experience and knowledge that Crawford (2009) takes issue in his examination of the place of knowledge in the workplace. He believes that knowledge and “doing” have become separated and thus intends to make a “radical critique of the view that theoretical knowledge is the only true knowledge” (p. 171) in his support of technical work. The disconnection between people and the way things work is evidence of a larger trend in education, as Crawford argues that the acceptance of credentialism in modern college education “habituates young people to accept as the normal course of things a mismatch between form and content, official representations and reality” (p.147). In the early history of higher education, a college degree was more often the way to reaffirm rather than create status in society, but this credentialism later opened its doors to meritocracy, as poorer students were able

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to use education in order to gain new status in the job market. Crawford’s critique of college education today focuses on a different sort of credentialism, namely, that which changes education from a process into a product: “as grades, credits, and degrees come to assume greater weight than substantive characteristics…pursuing these badges of merit becomes more important than actually learning” (p. 146).

The issue that Crawford is speaking from is how our society has come to define an educated person and to what extent this education is required in order to find meaningful work. He argues that rather than assigning prestige or stigma to certain career tracks, the worlds of blue-collar and white-collar work should be distinguished as equally valid, meant for different people based on the fitness of their disciplines, not their failure to meet a single ideal. The goal of one hundred percent college attendance is unrealistic given that many people are not up to the task of sitting in a classroom for another four years. Instead, Crawford (2009) describes an equally worthy disposition, that of the mechanic who must be able to rely on his experience and also “be constantly attentive to the possibility that [he or she] may be mistaken” (p. 99). This “disposition” must be appreciated because it is a point of resistance in the otherwise “dumbing down” of labor and lost of the ethic of doing good work for the sake of the product. And yet at the same time, there is an upskilling of the workforce, as credentialism has lead to the market being flooded with degrees for jobs that do not need them.

Crawford’s essential argument is not against the liberal arts, but how the alienation of the laborer from his labor has adversely affected the livelihood of both white-collar and blue-collar workers. Though the “partition of thinking from doing has bequeathed us the dichotomy of white collar versus blue collar, corresponding to mental versus manual,” both are affected by the assembly line of modern production (Crawford, 2009, p. 31). He begins the book in describing how in modern life, we often do not know how the objects we use work, and that ignorance is built into the design with the idea that such knowledge would only limit us. What we are left with is what he calls “virtualism,” which involves “a vision of the future in which we somehow take leave of material reality and glide about in a pure information economy” (Crawford, 2009, p. 3). This disconnect between idea and real is also evident in the type of work we do, as in both the office and the mechanic’s shop, capitalism is pulling for a “[reduction of] knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae” so that “skilled workers can be replaced with unskilled workers at a lower rate of pay” (Crawford, 2009, p. 39). In the office, tasks are broken down and the individual finds identity in the team, thus removing individual responsibility. In the mechanic’s shop, workers follow step-by-step instructions from a book rather than their own intuition: “the conception of the work is remote from the worker who does it” (Crawford, 2009, p. 40). Crawford echoes Marxism as he identifies the case of disconnected, uninspired modern life as being caused by the alienation of people from concrete products of their labor. The trades have lost their apprenticeships, and the office has lost its grounding in reality.

As a result, just like in the credentialism of modern education, modern labor becomes focused on the goal of monetary compensation rather than on the work itself. Rather than finding fulfillment in the work itself, the work is seen as a means to an end: “good work is taken to be work that maximizes one’s means for pursuing these other activities” (Crawford, 2009, p. 181). This ends up making work a burden in the eyes of the laborer, as it is done not out of self-actualization, but for the benefit of another. Crawford argues, however, that if we “follow the traces of our actions to their source, they intimate some understanding of the good life…in this conversation lies the potential of work to bring some measure of coherence to our lives” (Crawford, 2009, p. 197). It becomes clear throughout the book that he still has one major
element in common with the classicists: he is setting out to offer an antidote to the modern ailments of society, just as the classicists viewed their form of education “as a remedy for the cancers of modernity” (Winterer, 2004, p. 113). Classicists in the antebellum era changed their focus from using the study of classical rhetorical and moral texts could discipline future statesmen and clergymen to looking to the ancient societies to learn about their more democratic and cultural aspects.

Winterer characterizes the corresponding change in the universities as “turning from a love of Rome and a focus on classical grammar to a new focus on ancient Greek and the totality of its society, art, and literature,” and thus the foundation of the humanities (2004, p. 4). Students were taught the classics not merely as a model, but as a way to remedy what had gone wrong in industrial society, offering “a refuge from the present” (Winterer, 2004, p. 5). Classicism defended itself against utility critiques by claiming a higher purpose, that of culture: it “simply could not win a battle for utility and relevance anymore, for historicism and the ideal of high culture had now made classicism valuable precisely for its uselessness” (Winterer, 2004, p. 6). The goal of higher education was no longer to emulate the past, but to encourage self-culture in the individual; “the definition of an informed citizenry shifted as well, from the purely political goal of defending against tyranny to the personal goal of individual fulfillment and career advancement” (Winterer, 2004, p. 71). Classical education was no longer oratory training for the statesman or clergyman; it was a way to purify the self from the profane world of the market economy. Humanities developed as a field that was focused on “knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and erudition as a path to inward perfection and responsible citizenship” (Winterer, 2004, p. 118). While the scientists and industrialists criticized classical education for its lack of relevance in the new era of progress, classicism remained an element in the new humanities “as a moral and intellectual alternative to natural and social science” (Winterer, 2004, p. 132).

Just as the ancient Greeks were seen as “a remedy for political and civil corruption, materialism, anti-intellectualism, factionalism, and populist mediocrity” through its examples of ideal culture and democracy (Winterer, 2004, p. 68), Crawford argues that the philosophy of the mechanic’s trade can reaffirm the connection between people and their labor, knowing and doing, thus serving as the antidote to the modern worker’s alienation from labor. Yet while the classicists “asserted that rampant utilitarianism and materialism resulted partly from the misguided pursuits of an uneducated majority” (Winterer, 2004, p. 115), Crawford is arguing for utilitarianism in order to encourage meaningful work. Both Winterer and Crawford describe an element of the past as having potential as an antidote for the ills of the present, whether it is in ancient ethics or the days before the assembly line created “idiots” out of workers.

Crawford acknowledges that he is not the first to argue for the benefits of the technical trades in the modern world. During the Arts and Crafts Movement, “the tangible elements of craft were appealing as an antidote to vague feeling of unreality, diminished autonomy,” a sentiment that justified the existence of shop classes in the schools (Crawford, 2009, p. 28). Yet this movement still maintained the tracking division between vocational and liberal education, offering the theory behind the craft only to the non-vocational students. Crawford, however, aims to have liberal education learn from vocational. The team-mentality of the office can be replaced by that of the mechanic crew, where, rather than being dissolved into the group, “you have grounds for knowing your own worth independently of others” (Crawford, 2009, p. 157). Also, a mechanic or carpenter’s job cannot be outsourced or left up to a machine alone. It can be broken down into a collection of rules and formulae in a book, but the work itself becomes shoddy as the unskilled repair shop worker, lacking experience and connection to the work, makes incorrect
judgments. Unlike the experienced mechanic, he does not have multiple memories of typical situations from which to draw upon when deciding the best course of action for a given job.

The mechanic, it is argued, is able through the experience of unfamiliar to avoid self-absorption and “[join] a world that is independent of [him]self…His individuality is not only compatible with, it is realized through his efforts to reach a goal that is common” (Crawford, 2009, p. 207). Crawford argues that the mechanic’s experience of being face-to-face with problems independent of himself is what leads to his self-fulfillment; it is a “basic character of human agency, namely, that it arises only within concrete limits that are not of our making” (p. 64). Unlike the office worker, the mechanic is able to rely upon his own experiences to negotiate the realities of the world outside of himself and through recognizing those external realities, finds the truth of his own agency. As a result, “the mechanic’s activity, properly understood, is practical in character, rather than curious or theoretical” (Crawford, 2009, p. 124). Rather than having his knowledge separated from his doing, the two are interconnected and he finds fulfillment in his work by being both self-reliant and part of a community. By interacting with the unknown Other, the mechanic experience his own self through the dialectic that comes in facing the limits of his existence. The alienation of the worker from his labor robs him of the intrinsic satisfaction of the work and his self-realized humanity.

I read Crawford’s book anticipating an argument in favor of the technical over the liberal arts, perhaps grounding this claim in the utility of education or the value of working with material things rather than ideas. Yet it seems that he has not fully moved away from his classical training, as he, too, is looking to the past for an antidote to modern, postindustrial problems. At first glance, Crawford can be seen in opposition to his classical roots as he advocates experience over abstracted knowledge, but through Winterer, one can see that this opposition is lost in comparing him to post-antebellum classicism, when classicists changed the discipline into a more holistic study bent on saving people from modern life. His goal, likewise, is to remediate the ills of modern work by encouraging others to “[seek] out the cracks where individual agency and the love of knowledge can be realized today, in one’s own life,” either in trades or the offices (Crawford, 2009, p. 210). What this means for education is a change in focus from what a degree can do for you to what an education can do for you, something that Crawford and post-antebellum classicists do have in common. The value of the education or job done is not in the result, but in the process and the individual’s self-actualization through experiencing that process as part of a greater community of knowledge.

Crawford seeks to reestablish the prestige of the trade arts by arguing that their form of labor, so grounding knowledge and experience in the real world outside of the individual, is more conducive to having a fulfilled life, even more so than the humanities. The classicists, on the other hand, saw the humanities as a way to protect the self from the corrupting influences of the market driven by materialism rather than culture. Today, the issue of the value of the investment in a four-year and thus non-vocational degree is up for debate, but regardless of what is learned or not learned in college, the situation remains that the dual forces of credentialism in the job economy and a societal belief that, despite entry-level pay differences, all young people should aim for the prestige of a college education. All that Crawford can do is to inspire others to go against the system and try to find meaning and value rather than societal approval in their work. Just like the Greek-favoring classicists, he can offer an antidote in the less modern traditional trades, but, like the classicists, his ideals can only exist as a pocket of resistance in a society that bases its values on the market.
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