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Getting Your Hands Dirty: Notes on How Mormons (and Everyone) Should Work

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

By **Russell Arben Fox**

For decades, observers of American society have praised the Mormon people for their work ethic.¹ While the causes of that work ethic are many, certainly the role of moral teachings from general authorities cannot be discounted as a factor. Those teachings take various forms, of course, but most tend to present our duty to diligently labor in this life as a scriptural command², as well as connecting work with personal and spiritual development. Just recently, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf called work “an antidote for anxiety, an ointment for sorrow, and a doorway to possibility,” and encouraged church members to “cultivate a reputation for excellence in all that we do.”³ There is little to criticize about such a sentiment, though it does pose at least one relevant question—is “excellence” something that really can be striven for “in *all* that we do”?

To a degree, that question

was echoed in the title of one of Hugh Nibley’s most trenchant criticisms of contemporary Mormon life: “But What Kind of Work?”⁴ Few contemporary Mormons—besides Nibley—have been willing to attempt a particularly serious answer to the question of how, and in what way, faithful Mormons ought to apply themselves in the realm of work, though Mormon leaders of the nineteenth century were far less reluctant.⁵ Today’s Mormons, then, are perhaps obliged to turn elsewhere for considerations of what kinds of labor are most appropriate for relieving anxiety and sorrow, and opening up possibilities for personal and spiritual excellence. Should any of them choose to look, Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* would be a superb place to start.

Shop Class is not a self-help manual that aspires to theoretical critique, but the other way around: a serious work of philosophy, dealing with what it means to apply oneself to a task, and the different natures of different tasks, that cannot help but also be seen as a book of advice. It

succeeds at doing both admirably. Crawford received a Ph.D. in political theory from

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the University of Chicago, but—thanks in part to the perennially lousy academic job market—found himself working for a think-tank rather than teaching; and then, quickly tiring of what passed for the life of the mind in such a programmed setting, turned back to his first and true love: motorcycles. Obviously, this is an odd career arc, and Crawford is clearly an odd fellow; for innumerable social and cultural reasons, very few people who have the grades and the interest to obtain a graduate education in philosophy have previous work experience in such tasks as home construction, electrical engineering, and automobile repair, as Crawford did. But none of his personal history mitigates the intellectual firepower that he applies to the problem of work in America today; on the contrary, it adds to it.

So this is an intellectual work, written by a diploma-carrying member of the intellectual elite, but one who also happens to be a small business owner (he owns and runs his own repair shop) and a motorcycle repairman. It praises the intellectual virtues of the sort of manual trades (automobile and appliance repair, plumbing and electricity maintenance, building construction, metal and woodworking, etc.) which intellectuals often are bemused by, openly look down upon, or try to condescendingly relate to

(usually failing). For myself, intellectual though I may be, Crawford's book had me nodding along from the second paragraph of his introduction, where he makes a simple point about the disappearance of tools, and of arenas of action wherein we can make use of them to accomplish our goals, from the lives of most modern American consumers:

The fasteners holding small appliances together now often require esoteric screwdrivers not commonly available, apparently to prevent the curious or angry from interrogating the innards (p. 2).

So true! Anyone who as ever tried to replace some batteries or change a setting on a common household item, only to find to their frustration that *there's no way to get into the damn thing without breaking it*, knows exactly what Crawford is talking about. From that point on, he takes us on an intellectual survey of, and defense of, his chosen world of motorcycle repair, contrasting it all the while with the assumptions, pretensions, and limitations of the world he left behind.

Crawford borrows from Aristotle to speak of the difference between the work done by what are often called today "knowledge workers" or "symbolic analysts,"⁶ versus the work encompassed by the "stochastic arts"—those that

"diagnose and fix things that are variable, complex, and not of our own making." He includes in this category mechanics like himself, but also all those with occupations which, because of the material and physical limits they address in their labor, consequently face the "constant risk of failure." (After all, you cannot indefinitely manipulate a carburetor or a bone or a piece of lumber as you might a text or a line of figures.) The possibility of tangible, demonstrable failure (the engine which does not turn over, the bone which does not heal, the shelf which collapses when weight is placed upon it) at least potentially discourages self-absorption, and thereby promotes the "virtue of attentiveness," which makes truly responsible action possible. (p. 82). It is such virtues and activities which form Crawford's primary concern. While he clearly thinks highly of his own profession, grounds his analysis of work in numerous anecdotes drawn from his own life, and frequently slips into a very specific praise of his own life choices, throughout the book Crawford nonetheless continually links all such arguments to his broader and widely-applicable concern—the "struggle for individual agency, which I find to be at the center of modern life" (p. 7).

While there are many enemies of that agency, perhaps the most pervasive

one, the one which is most implicated in the spread of the kind of "intellectual" and "social" technologies that, through their organization of the material world which necessarily shapes our thinking, pre-empt much of our ability to act productively in relationship to that world, Crawford calls "absentee capitalism." By this he means the concentration of capital—and the concomitant control of much of the material infrastructure of our lives—into the hands of individuals and corporations committed to economic growth along lines that exists in the world of numbers and margins, and thus has little patience for the joys that workers who discipline and submit themselves to a difficult trade, one which requires them to slowly, attentively, work out the problems of tangible stuff for themselves, may know. Of course, to attack the kind of capitalism which allows for extensive specialization and proliferation is to attack a way of viewing the goods we consume which priorities price over virtue, as Crawford acknowledges forthrightly:

Any discipline that deals with an authoritative, independent reality requires honesty and humility....If occasions for the exercise of judgment are diminished, the moral-cognitive virtue of attentiveness will atrophy....These thoughts

should inform our choices as consumers. It may or may not make sense to have an engine rebuilt by your local mechanic, in narrow economic terms. You may be better off buying a rebuilt engine from one of the chain auto parts stores, which get them from high-volume remanufacturing operations down in Mexico...But a more public-spirited calculus would include a humane regard for the kind of labor involved in each alternative: on the one side disciplined attentiveness, enlivened by a mechanic's own judgments and ethical entanglement with a motor, and on the other synthesized carelessness. Further, the decision is inherently political, because the question who benefits is at stake: the internationalist order of absentee capital, or an individual possessed of personal knowledge. Given the ever-bolder raids of capital into the psychic territory of labor, our consumer choices contribute to a land war, on one side or the other, whether we are aware of the fact or not (pp. 100-102).

Towards the end of the book, Crawford returns to this theme, arguing that "we have failed utterly to prevent the concentration of economic power, or take account of how such concentration damages

the conditions under which full human flourishing becomes possible," adding that "[i]t is time to dispel the long-standing confusion of private property with corporate property," and recommending "a progressive-republican approach to the problem" (pp. 208-209). But fundamentally, Crawford's aim in this book is not polemical; he's a mechanic, and a Stoic, trying to understand the problem, not play judge with it and assign blame.

Not to say that he doesn't cast blame around; he does. But what he spends most of his pages addressing is not what lays behind this corruption of the value of work, and therefore of the ability of people to recognize and productively engage the limits of the material world, but rather with *how* that relationship with the practical arts is corrupted in the first place. This is the point at which many critics of modern capitalism and the world it has made start blaming technology, and praising the agrarian life of the yeoman farmer and landowner; investigating (often in Marxist language, whether they realize it or not) the alienation which individuals feel from the products and environments of their labor when technology takes away a sense of productive immediacy.⁷ But Crawford does not follow this path, at least not exactly.

For one thing, Crawford

has no affection for the "simpler" life (p. 6); on the contrary, he is a self-confessed gearhead, a fan of metal and power tools and powerful machines and speed. For another thing, he is dubious that our psychological or philosophical or moral association with the products of our own hands is truly disturbed by the technologically-enabled marketing of them to someone else ("If I am a furniture builder...what am I going to do with a hundred chairs?...I want to *see them in use*"--p. 186). But he *is* concerned about technology--specifically, he's concerned about those aforementioned social and intellectual technologies, those ways of thinking about and codifying the world which he sees as germinating in the schools of our credential-happy society, where every task is more prestigious if it can be theorized and taught as content in a classroom, and be written about by perfect idiots who have nonetheless mastered the "technology" of writing:

Service manuals were once written by people who worked on and lived with the machines they wrote about....The writers of modern manuals are neither mechanics nor engineers but rather technical writers. This is a profession that is institutionalized on the assumption that it has its

own principles that can be mastered without the writer being immersed in any particular problem; it is universal rather than situated. Technical writers know what, but they don't know how. They can be housed in an office building, and their work is organized in the most efficient way possible....This is my surmise, based on the nonsense these books usually contain. You parse nonsensical or mutually contradictory sentences over and over again, trying to extract meaning from them by referring them, somehow, to the facts before you. If there are drawings involved, they will have been made by a person certified in a computer-aided drafting software suite, not by someone who knows what he is looking at....As an intended substitute for personal knowledge, the division of labor predicated on an "intellectual technology" presents a false pretense of rationality, one that the mechanic sometimes has to work around in order to do his job. It would be a mistake to suppose that this is a superficial problem that could be fixed by, for example, better training procedures for the technical writing staff. What they need is experience as mechanics. Otherwise what they produce is "a

projection of thingness which, as it were, skips over the things," as Heidegger wrote in another context. Where the rubber meets the road, the mechanic is still responsible for the thing (pp. 176-177, 179).

Heidegger, along with Arendt and Kojève, are not the most cited philosophers in the book, but they lurk throughout it, their constant inquiry into matters of phenomenology and how we "appropriate" the world (and who, in fact, it is who does the appropriating) guiding how Crawford reads the ancient Greeks as well as interprets his own introduction to the world of motorcycles. The constant lesson is that unless one is engaged in a task with real limits and ends to it, a task that, because it has such parameters, can be pushed against and thus be authentically understood as making use of the full resources of a person, then one can never really see such work as cultivating virtue or making one happy. Of course, most people, most of the time, are just going to be happy with their paycheck; what does it matter that they only work in the artificial world of the cubicle or the office, dealing in words and ideas? Moreover, for a great many of us intellectuals, whether lawyers or academics or sociologists or whatever, the words and ideas we work with *are* real, and we do push ourselves against

them, and have to submit to the forms of our discipline if we desire excellence and satisfaction. All well and good, Crawford might say. But his narrative asserts that environments of work which consist of only words and ideas are less likely to provide the sort of concrete poles, as it were, around which communities of workers can form. And those communities, those associations shaped most commonly by a mutual engagement with "durable objects of use" (or, as he quotes Arendt as saying, "things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced"—p. 16), is where the real sources of contentment are to be found. Such communities of work—involving collaboration and apprenticeship—provide means of transmitting knowledge which can resist the professionalized lure of the service manual, and a form of bonding which re-affirms the tangible, and thus can make do without the addition of fancy social or intellectual models of organization.

Invariably, the invoking of community will strike some as risking nostalgia. One might ask, can "community" survive work that takes place outside of the simple, immediate world of the farmer in his village—that is, can it survive technology *at all*, even excluding the kind of warped "intellectual technology" that convinces folks to leaves realms of real,

practical discipline in favor of airy organizational make-work? Crawford thinks so. Neither a romantic nor a strict localist, he defends instead the place and value of the "political community, distinct from the market, where we locate a common good" (p. 188). As part of an intriguing discussion of Marx at this point, Crawford observes that the experience of alienation—the core of Marx's analysis of capitalism—is in part of function of our *perception of the use* of the things we contribute to. Politics like states can serve to resist and contain the economic spreading (and consequent unevenness) which makes the worker's perception of the use of the goods he or she has helped to produce less direct. "It is now the capitalist," Crawford writes, "who says, 'Workers of the world, unite!,' the better to dissolve those 'inefficiencies' in the labor market...that arise from political boundaries. The slogan once expressed a hope to organize a body of workers who were dispersed and hence exploitable, where now it captures the desire for a mass of 'human resources,' exploitable because undifferentiated" (pp. 188-189).

The *res publica* or commonwealth which Crawford talks about needs to be able to resist being "scaled up"; there is a limit to how far that which begins, or ought to begin, with a personal and

communal education (in a shop class, as an apprentice, or just learning from a friend) in the obduracy of particular things (or people, or the natural world) can or should be taken. That is not, for Crawford, necessarily an opening for a specific political solution—subsidiarity!

federalism! protectionism!—to all the issues he raises, though as I noted above, the stance he takes *is* a political one. Ultimately, whatever policy or ideological platform might be constructed out of his concerns, Crawford plainly states that fulfilling communities of work and action and use must begin in the "cracks" of the modern world (pp. 189, 210).

Should Mormons be persuaded by Crawford's reflections? Should they abandon the realms of high finance and credentialed specialization, and instead look to exploring those aforementioned "cracks" in our socio-economic world? Taking such an unconventional, even "dissident," route in the face of some common forms of social and intellectual "organizing" is hardly unknown in Mormon circles: the embrace of home-schooling by a great many Mormon families is an example of such. But applying it to the workplace itself, especially in the context of a more or less explicit criticism of modern capitalism is another proposal entirely, and one that, as yet,

has not had many takers. To be sure, there are numerous admonitions from modern scripture which suggest the Lord's preference for those whom sustain themselves with simple goods they have grown or constructed themselves⁸, but the lack of attention such verses have received from contemporary church leaders suggest that they are perhaps not to be directly applied to our present situation. Still, the possibility that Crawford's analysis might encourage more Mormons to experiment with some of the more radical economic implications of the real nature of work is not a completely absent one. After all, Hugh Nibley's reading of D&C 26:21 led him to conclude that, aside from missionary work and studying the scriptures, all our productive labors should be addresses producing what we can from the land beneath our feet: "the Great Triple Combination—farming, church, and study."⁹ So long as Hugh Nibley's arguments continue to be read and pondered by the faithful, perhaps other arguments emerging from the cracks of our capitalist order—or, as the case may be, from a motorcycle mechanic's shop—might be heard as well.

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1. For a recent example, see "The Mormon Work Ethic," *The Economist*, October 23, 2008 (retrieved from http://www.economist.com/world/unitedstates/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12480476).
2. Drawing upon such passages as Genesis 3: 17-19, among many others.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Two Principles for Any Economy—Work and Learn," address given at the priesthood session of the 179th Semi-Annual General Conference (retrieved from <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705334320/President-Dieter-F-Uchtdorf-Two-principles-for-any-economy--work-and-learn.html>).
4. Found in *Approaching Zion* in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol. 9 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books and FARMS, 1989).
5. Consider the following counsel: "The tendency, which is too common in these days, for young men to get a smattering of education and then think themselves unsuited for mechanical or other laborious pursuits is one that should not be

allowed to grow up among us...Every one should make it a matter of pride to be a producer, and not a consumer alone." Wilford Woodruff, *Millennial Star*, November 14, 1887. President Woodruff, as will become clear, would likely have been a major fan of Matthew Crawford's book.

6. Terms that were first popularized by Robert Reich; see especially *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for 21st Century Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

7. Wendell Berry is arguably the most famous contemporary example of this perspectives; consider his essays "Economy and Pleasure" (in *What Are People For?* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990]), "Conservation and Local Economy" (in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1992]), and "The Whole Horse" (in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Argarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Noman Wirzba, ed. [Washington D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 2002]).

8. See, for example, Mosiah 27:4 and D&C 42:40.

9. "Deny Not the Gifts of God," found in *Approaching Zion*, p. 145.

