

Truth at Hand

The IWC hosted a lively discussion forum on Saturday, January 29, on Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft*. We touched on a variety of topics, including education, the internet, student performance pressures (i.e., the film: "Race to Nowhere") and the power of attention (or, what Crawford calls "focal practice"). Yet, for me, coming away from the discussion, with many more questions opened than closed, my mind keeps gravitating around another idea, a more abstract and elusive entity. I keep thinking about 'truth'. I think, above all else, perhaps, Crawford's tightly argued, entertaining, and often cutting, cultural polemic did more to resuscitate and vitalize my notion of moral truth than anything else. This is the 'soulcraft' dimension of skilled manual work; the interior crafting that is all but overlooked when we are fixated on externals.

How, you might ask, does a book written "to elaborate the potential for human flourishing in the manual trades" perform such a service to moral philosophy? Aren't its hands a bit too covered in automotive grime for that? Well, this is precisely the point for me. Crawford is not fleeing the material world to gain glimpses of abstract truth, but rather is arguing for the blend of both worlds. His ideal is the melding of head, hands and heart. He is pointing to a moral virtue of truth that is exactly where it should be: right in front of us, in the very circumstances that surround us. And what is more, a virtue that becomes the more conspicuous the closer it gets to the objectivity of objects rather than the fantasies of mind.

To be clear, I am not speaking of 'truth' in the way it is often meant: a formulated assertion of 'what is'. I do not mean truth in the sense of a conviction or belief. I am speaking, rather, about a mental disposition toward self-correction, an innate suspicion toward feelings of self-sufficiency or completeness with regards to our mental life. I am thinking of truth as a practice, and not an object; a verb, so to speak, rather than a noun.

Crawford writes, "The moral significance of work that grapples with material things may lie in the simple fact that such things lie outside the self." (p.16). The self, left to its own devices, tends to a narcissistic disengagement from objectivity, a retreat into the squishy world of opinion and preference. A sense of responsibility is diminished the more one can hide from definite standards. The trafficking in spin and re-interpretation in public discourse results in a fog of confusion, a dense network of evasive claims and counterclaims, the spawn of reason's employment as rationalization rather than as a guide to careful inference. All of this constitutes what a Gandhian would call 'untruth'. In our own time, with the easy access to image and information via the internet, the challenge is exacerbated. Crawford states, "[Intuitive interface] introduces as little psychic friction as possible between the user's intention and its realization. It is such resistance that makes one aware of reality as an independent thing." (p.61).

The failure to be aware of the independence of reality is, in the extreme, insanity. And yet a distinction between this extremity, and the more common ailment of snap judgment, is more a difference of degree than kind. For it is a failure to critically measure the distance between a limited perspective and its object. In the conclusion of his book, Crawford points out that lack of critical thinking in international policy decisions can spell disaster. He cites a maxim attributed to LBJ's press secretary: "No one should be allowed to work in the West Wing of the White House who has not suffered a major disappointment in life." (p.204). And yet, the more that 'psychic friction' is softened or removed from our everyday experience, the less likely we are to have an unambiguous recognition of failure. Crawford traces the word 'idiot' back to its Greek meaning: a private person. Moral life is a matter of overcoming idiocy, of communication, sharing, measuring and being measured, giving and receiving. Truth is primarily a willingness to challenge and overcome any self-enclosure that protects ignorance.

The great internal advantage of manual work, the soul-advantage we might say, is that it aids this 'unselfing' of the mind. It gets us outside our head. Crawford borrows liberally from Iris Murdoch. "Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism is to be connected with virtue." (p.99). A carpenter's opinion matters very little when it comes to answering to the level or plumb-line. To be effective, he must blend his mind with the standards, principles, tools and measuring instruments of his craft. Personal opinion matters little, or not at all; ineffectiveness cannot be interpreted away. To learn carpentry, then, requires humility, a setting aside of self, in order to attend to the needs of "reality as an independent thing." Crawford points to "the craftsman's habitual deference ... toward the objective standards of his craft. ... This is a rare appearance in contemporary life -- a disinterested, articulable, and publicly affirmable idea of the good." (p.19).

Why is this crucial moral dimension often overlooked? With our disposition toward externals, we tend to conflate the rich physico-cognitive world of a skilled trade with its most concrete expression, seeing the work-'man' more in the light of the Latin *manus* (hand) than the Sanskrit *manas* (mind). To judge a 'carpenter' as all muscle and hammer makes about as much sense as judging a 'writer' as all ink and quill. Both terms are absurdly external, albeit necessary linguistic shorthands for skilled activities that are primarily cognitive.

I was talking all of this over later that evening, with a friend of mine who attended the forum. He questioned, Is Crawford saying that mental objectivity is exclusively the domain of physical work? What about mathematics and logic? Aren't they as objective as an open-end wrench? Can't students learn to 'un-self' as effectively before the quadratic formula as, say, a radiator in auto-shop class? This is a really good question, and the way we choose to answer it is important. It is not the case that students who drift away from the academic track are mental failures who may fulfill social needs as instruments of physical labor. This entrenched yet superficial functionalist view persists

as an apology for social and economic disparities, and as an excuse for the inertia surrounding them.

It seems more helpful to view all students in terms of the primary moral quest of awakening from private dreams and merging into shared worlds of thought. Some students can do this primarily in the abstract, through exacting mental disciplines. Other students require the concrete as a buttress for mental discipline. In all cases, the quest is the same. Yet, even this is overly simplified. It is more realistic to view every student as engaged in both abstract and concrete thought, but requiring differing proportions for individual growth. Consider, for example, the discipline of music. How do we classify that—as abstract or concrete? Clearly it seems to be both. Two violin students, comparable in development, might differ inwardly as much as the academic student and the shop class student: that is, one might primarily focus on technique, the other composition. Clearly, both need both, and it would be as wrong to say that wood and nylon are merely a means to make music audible, as to say that composition is merely fodder for the violin. The very meaning of music is in the balance of both, and life itself is more like music than anything else. Students of the future, one hopes, will not be artificially defined as mental or manual, but will find their own balance of head and hand. Then will truth be at hand, because we will see clearly how the hand serves truth.

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Joe has proposed to lead a book circle on Tuesday nights, exploring more deeply these ideas. Three books would be taken up successively:

Shop Class as Soulcraft by Matthew B. Crawford

The Mind at Work by Mike Rose

Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

Interested individuals should immediately contact Joe at joe@worldculture.org