

Castalia Institute

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# Learning by Building

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*in voce* **a.Plato**

### Abstract

An exploration of craft as epistemology and how building things with our hands provides an antidote to purely symbolic identity.

by a. Plato

*(Faculty Essay, Castalia Institute)*

*This essay is a faculty synthesis written in the voice of Plato. It is not a historical text and should not be attributed to the original author.*

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# Introduction

In the *Republic*, I wrote of the divided line, of the distinction between the visible and the intelligible, between the world of becoming and the world of being. But I also wrote of the craftsman, of the one who works with their hands, who shapes matter into form, who creates through making.

There is a tension here, one that has been noted by many commentators. On the one hand, I seem to privilege the abstract, the theoretical, the purely intelligible. On the other hand, I recognize the value of craft, of making, of working with the material world.

This essay explores that tension, but from a different angle. It asks: what does it mean to learn by building? What kind of knowledge does craft produce? And how does working with our hands provide an antidote to the purely symbolic identity that dominates so much of contemporary life?

This connects to the theme of persona explored elsewhere in this issue. When we work with our hands, when we build things, we engage with reality in a way that is not purely symbolic. We cannot mistake the mask for the face when we are shaping the mask ourselves, when we are working with the material that gives it form.

## The Knowledge of the Craftsman

The craftsman knows things that cannot be learned from books. They know the feel of wood, the resistance of metal, the behavior of materials under stress. They know through their hands, through their body, through direct engagement with the material world.

This is not theoretical knowledge, though theory may inform it. It is practical knowledge, embodied knowledge, knowledge that comes from doing rather than from thinking about doing. It is knowledge that cannot be fully expressed in words, that must be learned through practice, through repetition, through the slow accumulation of skill.

The philosopher may understand the concept of a chair, but the craftsman knows how to make one. The distinction is not merely between theory and practice; it is between different kinds of knowledge, different ways of knowing, different relationships with reality.

## **Craft as Epistemology**

Craft is not merely a way of making things; it is a way of knowing. When we build something, we learn about the materials we are working with, about the tools we are using, about the processes that transform raw matter into finished form.

This learning is not abstract. It is concrete, embodied, immediate. We learn by doing, by making mistakes, by correcting them, by refining our technique through practice. We learn through our hands, through our body, through direct engagement with the material world.

This is epistemology in the truest sense: a way of knowing that is grounded in experience, that is tested through practice, that is refined through the slow accumulation of skill and understanding.

## **The Antidote to Symbolic Identity**

In contemporary life, much of our identity is symbolic. We are defined by our roles, our credentials, our affiliations, our online personas. We are what we claim to be, what we present ourselves as, what we are recognized as by others.

But when we build something, when we work with our hands, we engage with reality in a way that is not purely symbolic. The chair either stands or it does not. The joint either fits or it does not. The material either behaves as we expect or it does not.

This is reality testing in the most direct sense. We cannot maintain a purely symbolic identity when we are working with materials that have their own properties, their own resistance, their own reality. We must adapt to the material, work with it, respect its nature.

This is the antidote to purely symbolic identity: engagement with the material world, with reality that is not merely what we say it is, but what it actually is.

## **The Persona and the Material**

This connects to the theme of persona. When we work with materials, we cannot simply impose our will. We must work with the material, respect its properties, adapt our techniques to its nature. The material has its own reality, its own resistance, its own way of being.

This is different from the purely symbolic realm, where we can create personae that have no material basis, that exist only in language, in representation, in the realm of signs. In the material realm, we cannot simply create; we must work with what is, adapt to reality, respect the nature of the materials we are using.

This is not to say that craft is not creative. It is deeply creative. But it is creative within constraints, creative in dialogue with materials, creative in response to the reality of the material world.

## **Learning Through Failure**

One of the most important aspects of learning by building is learning through failure. When we build something, we make mistakes. The joint does not fit. The material cracks. The design does not work as we expected.

These failures are not merely setbacks; they are opportunities for learning. They teach us about the materials, about our techniques, about the relationship between design and execution. They force us to adapt, to refine, to learn from experience.

This is different from purely symbolic learning, where mistakes may be corrected through argument, through revision, through the manipulation of signs. In craft, mistakes have material consequences. They cannot be simply erased; they must be worked with, learned from,

incorporated into our understanding.

## **The Integration of Theory and Practice**

This is not to say that theory is irrelevant to craft. On the contrary, theory can inform practice, can guide our understanding, can help us understand why things work as they do. But theory alone is not sufficient. We must also practice, must also build, must also engage with the material world directly.

The craftsman who understands both theory and practice, who can work with their hands and also understand the principles that underlie their work, has a deeper knowledge than one who knows only theory or only practice.

This integration is the goal of craft education: not to abandon theory, but to ground it in practice, to test it through building, to refine it through experience.

## **Craft and Inquiry**

Craft, understood in this way, is a form of inquiry. It is a way of exploring the material world, of understanding how things work, of learning through doing. It is inquiry that is grounded in practice, that is tested through building, that is refined through experience.

This is the kind of inquiry that the Castalia Institute values: not purely theoretical, not purely practical, but integrated, grounded, tested through engagement with reality. It is inquiry that respects the nature of materials, that works with constraints, that learns through failure and refinement.

# Conclusion

Learning by building is not merely a way of making things; it is a way of knowing, a form of epistemology, a mode of inquiry. It provides an antidote to purely symbolic identity by grounding us in the material world, by forcing us to engage with reality as it is, not merely as we represent it.

This is the value of craft: not that it produces useful objects, though it does, but that it produces knowledge, understanding, and a relationship with reality that cannot be achieved through purely symbolic means.

In a world dominated by symbols, by representations, by personae that may have no material basis, craft reminds us of the reality of the material world, of the resistance of matter, of the need to work with what is rather than simply imposing our will.

This is not to reject the symbolic realm, but to ground it in practice, to test it through building, to refine it through engagement with the material world. It is to recognize that knowledge comes not only from thinking, but also from doing, from making, from building.

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*Faculty essays at Castalia Institute are authored, edited, and curated under custodial responsibility to ensure accuracy, clarity, and ethical publication.*

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