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BOOK REVIEW

The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education: Historical Sources and Contemplative Practices

Sean Steel, Ph.D.

Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014

362 pages, \$95.00 USD (hardcover), \$26.95 (paperback)

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Reviewed by Mary Martinez, Loyola Marymount University

Dr. Sean Steel's book, *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Happiness in Education: Historical Sources and Contemplative Practices*, seeks to counteract the underlying lack of purpose that Steel believes pervades modern public education both in Canada, where he teaches and writes, and in the United States. His thesis is well timed, and should find an audience amongst both public school educators and those in Catholic education, who may find that spirituality has taken a back seat as they too are affected by the pursuit of higher rankings and better test scores. However, Steel's arguments are undermined by the level of detail provided as he maps the evolution of the variable meanings of his triad of critical concepts: knowledge, happiness, and contemplation. His critique of current trends in education and in education reforms and his proposals to address them could have been strengthened by addressing the larger issues of social justice that are at least nominally responsible for many of the changes Steel highlights.

Rather than blaming the achievement gap for the emergence of the measurement mania in education reform, Steel traces the current system to Dewey's conceptualization of public education as a necessary precondition for democracy. Universal education sounds like a good idea, but has resulted in an emphasis the acquisition of practical skills—what Steel calls “technical” education—over nurturing a love of learning for learning's sake, or the pursuit of wisdom. Such pursuit was a hallmark of a liberal education, which had been seen as the purview of the elite classes. Dewey argued for universal

education to emphasize the good that would come to society as a whole from an educated citizenry. In Steel's view, and in that of the philosophers he cites, these are both wrongheaded. Philosophy (which, for simplicity's sake, I will use to describe the pursuit of wisdom), is available to all, and in fact, should be promoted for all as the path to the greatest happiness. Technical education, on the other hand, encourages the individual to seek the things of the world by decontextualizing the purpose of education and converting it into pursuing more and better technological advancement.

Happiness, the second component essential to Steel's ontology, is another contentious concept. In his view, happiness is found through the realization of one's highest end through contemplation of the divine (for those of faith), or of the beautiful (for those who do not believe). It is, further, a necessary function of the educator and of schools generally to provide students with the means to achieve such happiness. This is not the case in a society that idealizes technical education. Technical education glorifies the present and the future and worldly achievement at the expense of the good and the beautiful. It leads to emptiness and aimlessness because the achievement is alienated from its purpose.

Finally, to achieve happiness through philosophy requires contemplation, the third rail in Steel's ontology. Steel makes the case for inserting time for contemplation into the school day. Contemplation is necessary to understand one's own limitations in order to strive better comprehend the beautiful.

Steel presents his material in an historical and dialectical fashion. He references both ancient and modern thinkers in developing his themes, and anticipates rebuttals and addresses them within each chapter. After reading the book, I have emerged with a greater understanding of the nuanced differences between kinds of knowing and thinking, in the discipline of philosophy; what happiness can be understood to be; and how contemplation can be valuable in the pursuit of learning. I also have an appreciation of his perspective that our current system disadvantages our youth by abstracting learning from its purpose.

However, while I and many others are much in sympathy with Dr. Steel's critiques of the limitations of modern public education, his foundational assumption that nurturing individual existential inquiry in the pursuit of wisdom is more valuable than, and in opposition to, the common good promoted by Dewey, must be questioned. Even if one accepts Steel's interpretation of the limitations of technical education, his proposal does nothing to address

the social conditions that inspired Dewey's work, and which still pertain today to some degree. Nor does Steel elaborate on why, exactly, it is better for society to support the pursuit of wisdom rather than applied education. Rather, his argument is articulated negatively, which seems a limitation in a book grounded in philosophy.

Furthermore, although I have attended Catholic schools at various points and have a familiarity with the language of philosophy and theology, this book was challenging. It is clear that precise language and the subtle distinctions that have emerged over time in the use of that language, represents a necessary component of Steel's theses, but it makes it very difficult for the non-academic reader. Although the book was published by a university press, one assumes that the intention was to reach a wider audience than other academics: unfortunately the difficult language and challenging structure will constitute a deterrent to many readers.

And that is unfortunate. As the debate around the nature and structure of educational reforms continues to swirl, Steel's book is a reminder to continually reflect on the purpose of those reforms and to consider not only the happiness of our youth, but our goals as a society. It does matter.

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