



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

Steel, Sean  
SUNY Press, 2014

Book Review

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Steel includes in this work both recommendations and critiques that follow from his conviction that educators can and should take up the study of philosophy in their classrooms, which in this discussion is K-12. Using a foundation of classical Greek philosophy, the author takes up five themes in the book: (1) a survey of current ideas about how the pursuit of wisdom is or is not part of education; (2) a retrieval of ancient and medieval ideas of wisdom and the search for wisdom; (3) a critical examination of educational trends and practices and the barriers they create to the pursuit of wisdom; (4) use of ancient and medieval thought to assess current educational movements that aspire to promote wisdom; (5) a survey of movements understood as contemplative pedagogies and some cautions about their limitations. Finally, he indicates his own proposal for this project.

Steel critiques current educational practice along lines that many readers will find familiar: emphasis on assessment, stress on global competition, and pursuit of technological expertise without concern for ultimate ends. All of these, he argues, have not only been mistaken for the ideal goals of education, they militate against the real goal – the pursuit of wisdom. Steel prescribes these as essential for the attainment of wisdom: *scholē* (leisure) leading to *theoria* (seeing) the ultimate good through the experience of *metaxy* (an experience of tension as one reaches from ignorance toward the Supreme Good, ultimate truth, or being as such). Taking from Plato the movement of ascent and descent as essential to reaching toward wisdom, he emphasizes the necessity of “dying to self and all that is not wisdom” (4). Steel is thorough in explaining his viewpoint in relationship to a host of educational greats: Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides, Pieper, and Bloom, to name but a few.

The author states clearly that the pursuit of wisdom in a classroom today is likely to create serious negative pushback from the whole educational establishment. He believes this because he is convinced that only awareness of one's ignorance makes wisdom possible. Such an experience of ignorance, he argues, is sure to be deeply uncomfortable and even intolerable for today's students who are trained to attain the "right" answer above all. Such a practice is also contrary, he finds, to the mandate given teachers to produce students who can pass the required assessments. For the most part Steel leaves it to the reader to navigate a second potential problem, the fact that an educational institution may not necessarily agree that assisting students to reach toward the Supreme Good (or some other ultimate) is part of their educational mandate – or is even permissible.

Steel acknowledges that philosophical programs and contemplative pedagogical movements that aspire to facilitate student encounters with wisdom are present. Many of these, he argues, do not reach their essential goal because they are used as a means to some end other than wisdom: health, relaxation, or happiness, for example. According to Steel, "contemplative activity is not a tool for happiness; it is happiness, for it is the highest activity of the best part of the soul in relation to its most sublime object in the Supreme Good" (259). His own programmatic proposal is extremely brief as a proportion of this substantial book and chiefly cites his own experience in teaching Greek philosophy to high school students and using more modern texts such as *Walden* to encourage a contemplative experience of the world.

This volume will be appreciated by those interested in the intensive application of classic Greek philosophy to current educational practice and to a critique of current contemplative pedagogical movements.

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