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Teacher Education and the Pursuit of Wisdom: A Practical Guide for Education Philosophy Courses (Sean Steel)

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Review of

Teacher Education and the Pursuit of Wisdom: A Practical Guide for Education Philosophy Courses

by Sean Steel, New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2018

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It is not news that, for some time now, philosophy of education as a subject has been fading from the course listings in Faculties of Education across North America. The reasons for this are depressingly nestled within broader cultural trends that have undermined the perceived benefits of a liberal arts education. However, one tangible response to this unfortunate state of affairs is for philosophers of education to stay on the lookout for compelling ways of engaging their students. In the introduction to *Teacher Education and the Pursuit of Wisdom: A Practical Guide for Education Philosophy Courses*, Sean Steel invites teacher-candidates to see their teaching as nothing less than the pursuit of wisdom and as a “*way of life*” (p. 3). More specifically, he explains that they can penetrate beneath the surface of the everyday, “to see what is true, and in knowing it, to love what *is*” (p. 21).

After extolling the benefits of the reflective practice of journaling to achieve these laudable goals, the rest of the text unfolds as a series of interpretations of selected authors and readings. In chapter one, Steel offers short sections on how the writings of Marcus Aurelius, A.G. Sertillanges, Friedrich Nietzsche, Louis L'Amour, Mohandas Gandhi, Eric Voegelin, Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and Henry Bugbee can provide inspiration. There are then longer individual chapters on Plato, Isocrates, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Jacques Maritain. I have listed the authors Steel covers not only to give a sense of the layout of the text, but also because some of these names are certainly interesting choices not typically included in survey texts in the philosophy of education. After a conclusion that tries to sum up the book as a whole, Steel helpfully provides both a series of writing prompts and some assessment tools to help teacher-candidates begin and monitor their journaling progress.

At its core, Steel's recommended philosophical approach is deeply indebted to ancient philosophy in general, and to Plato in particular. This is evident in the recommended journaling practice, where teacher-candidates are asked to love the truth in the form of pursuing “what *is*” quite simply for its own sake. Their access to this truth is via a directly intuitive or almost mystical experience where through reflection and writing they can come to *see* things differently. Of course, this setup, basing philosophy on a metaphor of privileged vision, is only possible if a certain metaphysical structure, especially a realm of abstract entities such as Plato's *forms*, is assumed to be securely in place. While I do sincerely admire Steel's philosophical passion in terms of his commitment to this approach, it is hard to avoid the conclusion

that it simply gets the better of him here. Unfortunately, it seems to generate both a defensiveness about what he sees as *real* philosophy, and a hostility to whatever he deems to be fake and therefore outside it.

In the introduction, for example, he makes the sweeping observation that “Mostly, *nobody* recognizes the genuine, original meaning of philosophy anymore, especially at universities” (p. 5). On the next page, he takes a swipe at John Dewey, whom he describes as “that great mocker of all genuine education philosophy,” and then declares that philosophy professors are “charlatans who get paid *not* to do anything genuinely philosophic at all” (p. 6). Steel does not elaborate upon or support these claims in any way, which makes them distractingly *ad hominem*. However, Steel is not finished in this vein. The very next section is entitled “On the Defunding & Persecution of Pseudo-Philosophy” and, citing Nietzsche, Steel insists that not only should departments of philosophy be defunded so they collapse, but the state needs to go after fake philosophers so that the pure or genuine articles will be left standing. This attitude is clearly beyond charming hyperbole, and unfortunately undermines the overall pedagogical aims of the text. Sadly, it becomes even more evident when we compare how Plato and Dewey are treated.

In the first of the two Plato chapters (all the other chosen philosophers get just one), Steel elevates Plato’s work to the height of reverence, even as he tries to insulate him from criticism. He achieves this through a number of doubtful moves. He cautions the reader “it will be important for you to experiment with leaving behind everything you have learned, or that you have been taught previously about Plato in past courses” (p. 51). Steel is confident that he knows not only what other people have said about Plato, but that it is largely all wrong. The question, of course, then remains: how should we read Plato? Two pages later, he claims “in his *Seventh Letter*, Plato actually remarks (this time in his *own* voice) that nothing he has written has ever been serious – that every one of his dialogues is fundamentally a form of play” (p. 53). The problem with this is that, while it is true that in the *Seventh Letter* Plato expresses doubt as to whether the written form in general can convey philosophical truth, he also provides a substantial digression on epistemology that does seem to set out his doctrinal views in this respect. To make matters more confusing still, Steel continues a page later: “Here is a general rule I offer each of you that might offend you, but I shall say it anyway: As you read Plato (or Shakespeare, for that matter), *always assume that the author is correct!*” (p. 54). Even though Steel is aware of how offensive this suggestion is (because he must know the key role of critical thinking and student engagement in higher education today), he nonetheless advances it anyway. His justification comes from Leo Strauss—incidentally, one of the intellectual touchstones of the neo-conservative political movement in the United States—and his idea of “logographic necessity,” where we are supposed to accept that “*every single word of Plato’s text is important*” (p. 55). Yet, when it comes to Plato’s idea of recollection, we are told “Socrates isn’t asking us to believe any “doctrine” here. There is no dogma. It’s a story! But like any good story, it reveals some deep truths to us” (p. 69). So, we are apparently not meant to invest in “doctrine,” but “truths” we are still supposed to simply believe.

The chapter on John Dewey is also revealing, with Steel this time playing the opposite role of diminishing the credibility of his philosophy. He writes, “I don’t want you to believe what Dewey writes about the ancients. In fact, you have my permission to ignore whatever he says about Plato or the Greeks, or about pre-modern education philosophy generally” (p. 224). Again, he provides no support for this claim, which would involve examining what Dewey actually said in this connection. Steel nonetheless does maintain that teacher-candidates should read Dewey, since “that bodes very well for your pedagogy, and it will also keep the busybodies and wolves away” (p. 224), as well as the “meddlesome” people and administrators (p. 225). I must admit I have never seen a justification for reading a philosopher’s work

that was even partially rooted in keeping people “away.” Steel continues some ten plus pages later “But here I shall say something very shocking to you: *Despite what all the textbooks everywhere on the planet say about him, Dewey is most assuredly not a philosopher!*” (p. 236). How all those other philosophers and textbooks got Dewey so wrong remains a mystery, although Steel does offer a justification of sorts when he goes on to explain that Dewey “does *not* love truth; whatever he means by *interest* in his educational understanding, it differs most certainly from Socratic *eros*, which is the ancient word for a desire that is intimately and passionately devoted to finding out *the truth*” (p. 236). Of course, this is question-begging, and sheds no light on the substantive philosophical differences between Plato and Dewey. The chapter rounds off with Steel warning teacher-candidates to “Learn what you can from John Dewey. Obviously, he’s not all bad. But also be cautious of the poison pill that he would have you swallow in the life of a teacher” (p. 241). Supposedly, this “pill” is a concern with educational topics like growth and democracy at the expense of the contemplation of what *is*.

In the conclusion, Steel devotes considerable space to warning how the conception and practice of philosophy he extols is not that amenable to assessment protocols currently in vogue across the Western world. He does helpfully admit, however, that in his view “genuine philosophy was always conceived as a ‘way of life’; as such, it *must* take the form of a spiritual practice (*askesis*) of searching (*zetesis*) that can only be divested of its religious or cultic character—whether Eastern or Western in flavour—at the peril of forfeiting the sacred heart of the activity itself” (p. 324). However, this is precisely the core premise that needed to be placed right up front and articulated, developed, and supported through argument. I so wish that Steel had tried to show us what his cherished brand of Platonism has to offer us today at this moment of the twenty-first century. This could have been achieved in two overlapping and intertwined ways. First, he could have looked at other Neo-Platonic authors, and the history of Neo-Platonism in general, to mine interesting questions and insights. Second, he could have shared and discussed samples from his own and his students’ journal entries that could then demonstrate his pedagogical suggestions in vivid and relevant ways.

In the end, especially with the difficulties I mentioned earlier that philosophers of education face today, I could not recommend this text. Despite the subtitle, I do not feel it would be a very “practical” choice. In my considerable experience working in higher education, I am confident that teacher-candidates would likely be quite put off by the veneration of Plato that makes him largely immune to criticism. They also always want to examine and discuss the relationship between their educational reflection and practice and ethical and political topics like human rights, equity, and social justice in ways that Steel’s approach greatly constrains. Teaching philosophy to teacher-candidates is often hard because the scholars who do it have to keep justifying to everyone why they think it still matters. What we need today are engaging texts for teacher-candidates that can bring a diverse range of philosophical traditions and perspectives and questions to life. The better we do this, the better we can make the case to everyone willing to listen that philosophy can indeed help inform what we think is possible and important about education.

About the Author

Trent Davis is Associate Professor of Education at St. Mary's University in Calgary, Alberta. His research interests focus on the philosophy of psychotherapy, learning from literature, and the history of philosophy.