

## Education: People or Products?

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Many Americans regard money as the greatest good in life and have come to regard anything that does not contribute to monetary wealth, such as pursuing the humanities or earning a modest wage as a skilled laborer, as relatively worthless. (Consider the comments an English (or history or art) major often hears: “How are you going to make money with *that* degree? What good is it?”) In defining worth solely in terms of dollars, we have distorted the amount of respect for and value placed on different occupations. Blue-collar workers—people without whom no society can function—are usually viewed as inferior to their white-collar office counterparts. Matthew Crawford attributes this disrespect to the false, but generally accepted “dichotomy of knowledge work versus manual work” as is reflected in the lower wages earned by tradespeople (*Shop Class* 20). Therefore, in American culture, we should broaden our narrow perception of value to balance the emphasis between intellectual work and other occupations; furthermore, the educational system should teach that personal fulfillment and what Plato would call “the Good” do not lie in the pursuit of wealth.

Like so many other societies around the world and throughout history, Americans have largely fallen prey to the illusion that money will provide happiness and satisfaction. Indeed, this goal is what the American Dream seems to promise. In reality, this hope is only true up to a certain point when basic needs are met, after which money and happiness no longer correlate. In the United States, data have shown that point to be approximately \$10,000 per year (Drakopoulos para. 10). This figure is roughly the same as the official poverty threshold (United States para. 4). Despite this reality, most of us still want a higher salary, even if we already earn

ten times this figure. As technology has rapidly advanced in the last century and a half, we have come to worship math and science, the two fields that drive technological innovation, and consequently, economic growth. *Harper's Magazine* contributing editor Mark Slouka discusses this obsession with science and math and the consequent neglect of everything else in his essay "Dehumanized: When Math and Science Rule the School." He argues that we are infatuated with math and science because they give return value in the only language most of us seem to understand: dollars (32). This obsession has gradually stifled other important aspects of education that do not seem to promote direct economic and technological progress. However, is that the only type of progress we desire to make? Another type of progress to which we aspire and of which we often speak involves improving our character and achieving self-fulfillment, known more simply as happiness. Though there may be instances when these two pursuits coincide, to consider them as interchangeable would be a significant error. As I write this essay on a laptop computer connected always to the Internet with my iPod and cell phone on the desk, I ponder how much faster life is now than it would have been a century or two ago. Work that is carried out by mere keystrokes now would have taken many tedious hours or even been impossible before the vast technological progress made in recent years. Life today may be faster and more efficient—one common definition of progress—but it may not be any better. According to a study by Stavros Drakopoulos, there has been no increase in Americans' happiness in the last fifty years despite the doubling of average incomes (para. 6). Even though America is rich with money and technology, it has all failed to make us happier. Despite this fact, we remain naively convinced that wealth will eventually bring us satisfaction.

Similar to the shackled men in Plato's Cave, we remain in our self-induced chains, seeing only the shadows of money and progress while we sit in our enervating desk jobs and pity the man who works with his hands, holding on to the delusion that our "intellectual" jobs make us happier. Matthew Crawford, Doctorate-holding motorcycle mechanic and philosopher, argues that because of this phenomenon, our educators virtually ignore the opportunities offered by trade schools and apprenticeships and "any high school principal who doesn't claim his goal is 'one hundred percent college attendance' is likely to be accused of harboring 'low expectations' and run out of town by indignant parents" (*Shop Class* 32). We Americans as a whole have limited our understanding of "value" to primarily monetary terms. Since math and science are financially lucrative, humanities and blue-collar work are belittled. In doing so, we have amplified the erroneous dichotomy between manual labor and intelligence. In his article "The Case for Working with Your Hands," Matthew Crawford notes that "because the work is dirty, many people assume that it is also stupid," a fallacy widely accepted in white-collar society, despite the sophisticated thinking that "dirty" work often requires (para. 8). The trades, or "real work" as Crawford would likely say, can be equally or more fulfilling to the laborer, who, unlike the cubicle slave, can see the results of and feel a true accomplishment in his/her work. This interaction between work and a concrete product provides a deep satisfaction that has largely been lost in the office, where results and consequences are often remote from decisions. The trades require significant accountability as well, since carelessness and mistakes must be acknowledged and dealt with personally (Crawford, "Case for Working" para. 36). As a result of this "dirty equals stupid" fallacy and the disrespect it brings to skilled labor, an intelligent student who chooses mechanical work rather than a series of degrees is often seen

as “eccentric, if not self-destructive” (Crawford, “Case for Working” para. 7). As a result, many bright students are sent to cubicle prisons when they would be much happier building or repairing real things.

In his “Allegory of the Cave,” Plato often speaks of “the Good,” his highest form, from which every other good idea and action is derived; there are aspects of blue-collar work that are arguably closer to this Good than anything in the academic and business world. To illustrate, we often poke fun at the educated or the business world and its confusing actions and irrational reasoning. (The popularity of the satirical comic strip *Dilbert* and the TV show *The Office* are perfect examples of how we view office life.) Matthew Crawford complains about his work at a Washington think tank that “required [him] to reason backward, from desired conclusion to suitable premise,” rather than the more logical inverse (“Case for Working” para.12). Later in the same article, he compares one of his early corporate trainers to a “veteran Soviet bureaucrat who must work on two levels at once: reality and official ideology,” trapped in the cogs of an absurd machine (para. 27). Such illogical and incongruous work is detrimental to our intellectual health. This inverted thinking is present not only in the politics of Washington but also in our schools. Even in the administration of my own high school, I can easily find examples of irrational and careless actions. For instance, every department in the school has a certain yearly budget, and if it does not happen to need all of its funding in any particular year, its budget is trimmed to whatever it used that year. Since those heading the departments know that they will need the funds for periodic expenses, they spend the annual surplus to avoid trimming the budget for the next year, resulting in wasteful purchases like the unused computer speakers that have been resting under the desk of every

guidance counselor for the last five years. On the district scale, several years ago the school board hastily (and irretrievably) spent a mysterious \$1.5 million surplus before they discovered the accounting mistake that had made it appear. The district is still trying to recover the deficit from that careless mistake, and unsurprisingly, the board chose to release the news of the error only after elections, so as to avoid serious consequences for their carelessness. Plato would argue that the Good is far more likely to be present in the genuine reasoning of hands-on work than in the false rationality and irresponsibility so often embedded in the bureaucracy of government and business institutions.

As the respect for manual work has suffered in the narrowing of respectable occupations, so also has the study of the humanities and arts regrettably suffered against the domination of technology-related studies. Expertise and talent in science and technology are more highly valued than an equal-but-different ability in, for example, philosophy or music. Math and science, or “mathandscience” as Mark Slouka writes, have widely become the standard for intelligence. I can validate this claim easily from personal experience as I am constantly bombarded with the question, “What is your major?” As soon as I say “biochemistry,” I can see the assumptions turning in the questioner’s head. (*Oh, he must be really smart. He’s probably going to become a doctor or go into research. He’ll probably make lots of money.*) Often they say something similar aloud. Since this stereotype has become the ideal picture of success, the questioner assumes it must be the path I will take.

While science and math may be essential to support our modern economy, the humanities are essential to the preservation of our nation and its democratic ideals. So often now we hear outcries of panic about our struggling education system, but all we seem to be

concerned about are the dollars and cents each educated employee will add to the GDP. Mark Slouka sardonically writes that “Education in America today is...about investing in our human capital, and please note what’s modifying what” (34). Education is no longer about improving the individual, but simply manufacturing units of production. Often overlooked is the value of expanding our view of the world, analysis of where we came from, and why we believe what we believe. In “The Apology,” Socrates famously argues that “the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and...the life which is unexamined is not worth living” (Plato 124). By overlooking discussion of history and morality, as well as the training in rhetoric to do so effectively, Americans are essentially making education worthless. How are students to learn from the mistakes of the past and make progress today if history is forgotten or at best, glossed over in our schools? Educators should focus on graduating citizens capable of maintaining a democracy, as Marcus Eure, a high school English teacher in New York State, does every day. Eure sees his work as more than drilling syntax rules into his students; he nudges his pupils to think logically while writing and speaking with clarity and purpose. His students read and discuss articles on torture, lies (especially socially acceptable lies like Santa Claus), horror films, and casually brutal video games. Such deep and often uncomfortable topics include the nature of morality and how we respond to society. Eure responds to criticism of his class by asserting that his courses prepare students for all of life by challenging them to examine their own understanding and to strive for truth (Slouka 40). Nevertheless, teachers like Marcus Eure are rare, and since these issues have no direct *monetary* gain, they receive little recognition or focus in most classrooms. Plato and Socrates would undoubtedly condemn this American system, as money was the lowest element of their value system. Education to them was

intended not to create qualified employees to work as cogs in the immense economic machine, but to enlighten the individual students by exposing them to the world and directing their thoughts toward the Good. Studying calculus and nanotechnology will rarely cause a student to ponder his/her faith or perspective on life, as these exercises are almost assuredly not the way to gradually tune one's soul toward the Good. However, since our society places little worth on pursuing what Plato so highly esteemed, we see no practical purpose in the studies that will lead us there.

Even in the minimal study of the humanities that our educational system does offer, Americans have marginalized the meaning of what is taught at the expense of helping students develop into citizens. Consider the discussion of what we believe to be right and wrong, which is now effectively taboo in many schools. Due to fear of accusations of indoctrination, most teachers are expected not to teach anything in regard to morality, and it is belittled by the hollow word "values" and restricted to discussions in the church and home. This attitude has effectively removed public debate on morality and ethics from many schools, a dangerous development for the ideals of our democratic republic. When we fail to encourage discussion, controversy, and breadth of knowledge, the citizens sent out into society will be inadequately prepared to sustain the nation that they are charged with preserving. Science and math are not the most important assets for maintaining a democracy, and Slouka points out that "political freedom, whatever the market evangelists may tell us, is not an automatic by-product of a growing economy" (36). China and its rising position in the global economy serve as an excellent example of this fact, as despite its impressive economic growth, China is still known for its political and religious oppression. Socrates would readily explain that the best way to

teach is through discussion and free thought, but what is now left in our educational system leaves little room for discussion, debate, or growth.

Balancing America's perspectives of what is valuable in education rests primarily on adjusting what we consider to be most valuable in society. In reference to the purpose and value of education, the Schools Chancellor of the District of Columbia said, "This is exactly what life is about. You get a paycheck every two weeks. We're preparing children for life" (qtd. in Slouka 33). Is the biweekly paycheck (and its size) really what life is about? As long as wealth remains the chief objective of our lives, our educational system cannot change for the better. Contrary to the common definition of a "good job" as one that is high-paying, Crawford argues that "a good job requires a field of action where you can put your best capacities to work and see an effect in the world" ("Case for Working" para. 34). Americans must begin to realize that the pursuit of money and the pursuit of the Good and fulfillment in life are not synonymous.

When that perspective shifts, the priorities and expectations of our schools will shift into balance. They will again offer technology and history, math and music, business and shop class, treating each with equal respect and encouraging each student to excel where he or she is best suited. Our educational system will produce complete citizens, rather than mere employees. These citizens will undoubtedly live in far greater fulfillment than if accumulating money were the chief objective of their lives. Only if we focus on educating students to be such citizens will America continue to thrive.

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