



**Human Rights in Education** by Donald Vandenberg. New York: Philosophical Library, 1983

**Education as a Human Right: A Theory of Curriculum and Pedagogy** by Donald Vandenberg

These two complementary texts are studies in the philosophy of education. Experiencing them is like spending some hours high in the hills, where the air is thin and sometimes bracing, where the water is pure and cold. Indeed, this reviewer is reminded of some lines in a poem by Elizabeth Bishop called "At the Fish-houses," where she speaks of water that is "icily free above the stones." She goes on:

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown. (1983, p. 66)

Grounded in phenomenological thought, Dr. Vandenberg's work aspires toward a kind of rationalism as well. For him, pedagogical questions are moral questions and should be "reasoned through in terms of universal obligations expressed as human rights." The rights intrinsic to the educational process, as he views it, include education to freedom, equal education, discipline and dignity, neutrality, and education *to* human rights. Kantian, yes, and also Kohlbergian; since Vandenberg puts so much stress on Lawrence Kohlberg's stage six of moral development. He adjures us to think about moral problems in terms of universal principles at the highest level of abstraction; and he wants us to recognize that a human rights ethic is always involved in resolving educational questions.

One reason for this has to do with the danger of dehumanization implicit in the technologization of the world. Technological advance and the demands it makes cannot be stopped. This does not mean, however, that upward mobility or any particular ideological issue should be a core concern of schools. There will always be young persons of different capacities; there will always be those who want to attain nonacademic skills and proficiencies through school attendance. All are entitled to equality of provision, access to a common curriculum, and a fair share of credentials. The crucial obligation of the educator is to resist as far as possible the encroachments of technologization and retain the "elements of humanity."

The conception of human rights being adumbrated here not simply a concept accessible to those who have reached the highest level of cognitive development; it is founded in a consciousness of human dignity. Linked to this (and the point is strongly made in both books) is the right of moral agency, involving each

person's responsibility for her/his own conduct. It is an aspect of the sense of agency, however, that each person has to decide for herself or himself what it means to be responsible in particular contexts. This is part of what it is to be free in the moral sense; and, for Vandenberg, freedom

belongs in the educational process to enable people to learn how to be responsible and gradually become adult. At each age level, in each subject, and every day, children and youth ought to be allowed the freedom they can manage because they learn to be free by being responsible and gradually become adult. At each age level, in each subject, and every day, children and youth ought to be allowed the freedom they can manage because they learn to be free by being responsible for progressively larger, more complicated things. Because it is a necessary condition for becoming a human being, such an education to freedom is a human right. (1983, p. 78)

Much depends, in this argument, on Vandenberg's conception of a person who becomes human to the degree she/he can function as a responsible moral agent in a social context. He qualifies this to the extent of saying that in the classroom freedom has to be "age-placed, sequential, and developmental" (1983, p. 77), even as each child gradually learns what it is to be responsible. Friendship, fraternity, and what is called "pedagogic fondness" characterize the contexts of children's becoming as persons, since all are necessary if there is to be an ongoing regard for each child's dignity. It is interesting to find Vandenberg's notion of community expanding somewhat in the second book when he responds to feminist challenges to patriarchy. When he points to R.S. Peters' exclusive reference to boys in his writing and to his scepticism with regard to the educability of the masses, he says that Peters probably thought that ordinary people could not be initiated into the public world "supposedly constitutive of a civilized life" (1990, p. 61). Vandenberg suggests that the word "public" might have been replaced by "common" and goes on to relate this notion to feminist paradigms and to such feminist conceptions as connectedness, sharing, and care. The tension between Kohlberg's cognitivism and the "different voice" emphasized by women is never directly confronted, although Vandenberg does eventually point out that "the development of moral feelings and sentiments ... may be more significant in one's actual moral growth than the development of moral reasoning" (1990, p. 110). He does not for a moment set aside, however, the question of what knowledge and skills should be available in common general education to insure the assumption of the responsibilities of moral agency.

It is not only the mind-set of technologization that obstructs access to the things of the world and stands in the way of moral agency. Vandenberg begins his second book with talk of nihilism. He shares with writers as different as Allan Bloom, Clarence Karier, and David Purpel an antipathy to both relativism and nihilism. Vandenberg, however, objects vehemently to the idea of a moral crisis and to the claim that values are historically and culturally relative. Since values are objectively and intersubjectively valid, he says, there can be no moral crisis. The real problem has to do with an ignorance of these values. The credibility of our *knowledge* of the good and right has been destroyed; the good and the right themselves do not change. At odds with post-modern notions of contingency as well as relativism, he not only lays stress on the importance of valuing things in classrooms but on an orientation to some transpersonal standard. Again the issue is the kind of moral and cognitive development required for the responsi-

bilities of moral agency, not whether or not things are falling apart in the ethical domain. (If Vandenberg were inclined to consult poetry, as he is not, he would not agree with the Yeatsian claim that the centre cannot hold, or that "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.")

Nor does he associate the sense of moral crisis with widespread fears of nuclear annihilation. For one thing, he points to a certain self-fulfilling component in talk of moral crisis. For another, he asserts that what people really fear is their own deaths, and they often displace that fear by projecting it into "horror over World War III" (1990, p. 9). In existential tones, he reminds his readers that human lives are always endangered. A consciousness of this, like the consciousness of the uncontrollability of events, sensitizes human beings to the human condition. It is, however, because of that uncontrollability that knowledge of the good and right becomes so vitally important. Educators, in consequence, ought to engage in moral and value education with confidence in the likelihood of the world's moral regeneration. One aspect of this may be a concern for "communities under law," or rule-governed moral communities in classrooms where "learning occurs because of the enveloping teleology of the school" (1990, p. 102).

Vandenberg ends the first book with a discussion of democracy and neutrality in the schools society has established to "preserve and reform itself." They do this, he writes, "through enabling the disciplined study of the issues that the human heritage has raised to the level of legitimate controversy" (1983, p. 263). Unperturbed by post-modern critiques of canon and of heritage, he calls with the best of his solemn eloquence for loyalty to the human heritage and human possibility. He insists on neutrality and good will; and he appears to believe that the humanization that can occur in schools where reparative justice rules will progressively humanize society.

In *Education as a Human Right*, of course, he focuses down on the means of achieving such humanization through curriculum and particular approaches to pedagogy. He hopes to see increasingly communalized classrooms structured "by the human rights to freedom, equal consideration, and brotherly and sisterly love to establish dialogical relations among students in atmosphere of affection" (1990, p. 93). Children will learn to value things in such classrooms, he believes, and, at once, be given access to the kinds of discourse that will give them to access to the world. This involves him immediately with cognitive relativism and what he conceives to be an intellectual crisis now confronting us. He moves on through an overview of texts, dialogue, and what he calls "normative educational questions" that have to do with what people *should* know and how they ought to live.

There follows an overview of various theories of knowledge, during which the author speaks of rational, deductive processes as the conceptual consciousness of things and proposes an integration of the conceptual and the perceptual. Knowledge is most adequate and truthful, he reminds us, "when it is most perceptually and conceptually disciplined" (1990, p. 181). This provides a perspective for looking at a range of didactic and heuristic approaches to pedagogy: R.S. Peters', Herbert Spencer's, John Dewey's, and Harry Broudy's. Each one strikes him as marked by some degree of nihilism because of its emphasis on certain epistemic characteristics at the expense of others; and he concludes with an expressed intention to bring the various insights together in a coherent

theory that may clarify what general education means in a time of intellectual crisis.

In his last chapters, he deals not solely with Paulo Freire's "co-intentional dialogic" but what he calls the "conceptual dialogics" of the present reviewer, whose treatment of the disciplines as existential modes of sense-making he seems to approve. Indeed, he appears to be unusually generous when it comes to this reviewer's effort over the years to tap existential and phenomenological sources for a coherent pedagogy, one that leaves teachers free to choose and does not thrust them into subjectivism. Vandenberg's own words about what he calls the "elements" of the common general education he wishes to see hold great phenomenological relevance and summon up the sound and feel of Vandenberg's earliest book, the wonderful "Being and Education." Here he speaks again of the manipulable world, the play world, the natural world, the social world, the lived world, the world of books, the world of numbers; and he ends with a remarkably clear laying out of the "strands" of a humanizing curriculum.

The problems this reviewer has with the books stem, in part, from her own social activism, her interest in literature and the other arts, and her unabashed postmodern relativism. The books might have been improved if they were more impassioned, and if they made more use of anecdote, concrete example, "story." Near the end of the second book, things come alive when the Abraham and Isaac section of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is used; and there might well be more such moments. This commentator cannot but regret the underestimation of the arts, for all the sympathetic treatment of Gadamer's hermeneutics and the work done by Harry Broudy in opening up the world of arts to the young. Important and valuable though Vandenberg's pages are on equal access and diverse human possibilities, there is a peculiar neglect of the structural factors that constrain and often distort the work of schools. Homelessness, poverty, violence, the disintegration of families, drug addiction, AIDS: all are eating away at the very roots of humanization, as social support systems continue to decay, and networks of concern are torn. It is clear that it is not the responsibility of schools, as Vandenberg reminds us, to change the social order; society has to be such as to sustain schools that foster human rights and allow for human agency (and even witnessing the truth). It might have been well to disclose some of the darkness even as a dream of possibility is permitted to unfold.

Yes, it is clear, and it is cold, and it flows up to the end. The knowledge Donald Vandenberg makes available here can only continue flowing as it moves more readers (as it ought to) to choose existentially to "do" philosophy of education somewhat as this author does it. He offers us an important way of becoming human beings, moral agents with an authentic mode of being in the world.

#### Reference

Bishop, E. (1983). *Collected poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

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**Reading Curriculum Theory: The Development of a New Hermeneutic** by William Reynolds, New York: Peter Lang, 1989

In this work William Reynolds embarks on "a search for a voice to express my experience and understanding of curriculum theory texts" (p. 6). For him, not to