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

Reviewed by

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The most disappointing books are those in which the author undertakes some very promising line of inquiry and then goes seriously astray. Donald Vandenberg's *Human Rights in Education* falls into this category. Vandenberg argues that we are being dehumanized through the predominance of technological consciousness in contemporary culture. The remedy for this evil lies in the recovery of our sense of human dignity, which in turn presupposes adherence to an adequate theory of human rights. That is the starting point of Vandenberg's book and the bulk of the text is devoted to specifying our human rights as they apply within the educational process. The author employs the principles of Kohlbergian stage six moral reasoning as the methodological basis of his enquiry.

All this might well provide the framework of a worthy intellectual endeavor, but it also raises a number of questions which the author could reasonably be expected to address. In the first place, one wants to know just what is meant by "technological consciousness" and how its cultural predominance is related to current scientific and political practices. Secondly, it is by no means obvious that the concept of human rights, which is undoubtedly an important *political* concept, has the same importance in *educational* contexts. Francis Schrag has recently attempted to show that the intimacy and unconditional regard which is appropriate in the family are ill served by an emphasis upon rights in the relationship between parents and children. If Schrag is right about this, it might also be true that an emphasis upon rights in the relationship between teachers and students would be damaging for similar reasons. Since Schrag's argument is partly based upon a Buberian conception of personal relationships, one would expect that Vandenberg, who is supposed to be an expert on existentialism, would be sensitive to this problem. Thirdly, if Kohlberg's theory is to provide the methodological basis for a theory of human rights, there should be some attempt to rebut the serious criticisms which Carol Gilligan has recently raised of stage six reasoning. Vandenberg offers a very facile answer to the first question and completely ignores the second and third. It would be ungenerous to stress these deficiencies if the author nonetheless had something interesting and novel to say about human rights and education but that is not the case.

Vandenberg's argument is vitiated at the outset by a very superficial treatment of the problem of technological consciousness. He tells us that the problem lies not in science or technology per se but in our failure to develop moral, political, and perhaps religious consciousness to a sufficient degree. There is an obvious contrast here with more radical diagnoses of our dehumanization which suggest that the manipulative orientation to the world which has produced our technological hubris is also fundamental to the dominant conception of scientific practice. Vandenberg may be right to reject this more radical position, but at least we are entitled to know why he does so. The reasons he gives us are puerile. His main point seems to be that scientists know more about what they are doing than radical philosophers of science, and so we should trust the former and ignore the latter (p. 24). Of course, scientists do have the best *technical* knowledge of what they are doing, but whether they have the best grasp of its human significance is another matter entirely, although Vandenberg is oblivious to this elementary distinction. Furthermore, since the credulous deference to "the experts" which Vandenberg recommends is already deeply rooted in contemporary institutions such as the school, it is difficult to see how it could possibly enable us to rectify the current limitations of schooling or any other institution.

The conservative tenor of the opening chapter is maintained through the remainder of the book despite the liberal rhetoric which the author frequently employs. For instance, Vandenberg maintains that the child possesses rights to freedom and democratic participation within the school, but these imply nothing that the staunchest upholder of our educational status quo would find offensive. Thus students are entitled to freedom so long as it does not prevent them from doing "the right thing, which is to accomplish the objectives pre-specified in the syllabus or curriculum guide" (p. 70). This is as ridiculous as saying that adults have a right to freedom so long as they do what they are supposed to do, which is determined by a process in which they have no voice. Either position is compatible with the most flagrant authoritarianism. The right to democratic participation undergoes a similar debasement. According to Vandenberg all that is necessary is a suggestion box, an ombudsman elected by students (with negligible authority), and student evaluation of courses (pp. 200-205).

Readers would be well advised to look elsewhere if they wish to learn something about human rights in the contexts of childhood and education. Vandenberg's book can be safely ignored.

References

- Gilligan, Carol (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schrag, Francis (1976). Justice and the family. *Inquiry*, 19.