

Introduction

CONTRADICTIONARY ENCOUNTERS WITH HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

We must...as far as we can, make ourselves immortals, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us.

Aristotle

We, however, want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.

Nietzsche

Since we are here just for a while, we might as well show some style.

James Taylor

At first blush, all is well in the state of humanistic education. At the ideological level, all the countries of the western world, and many others too, affirm their loyalty to the humanistic worldview and perceive in it a basis for scientific thought, global humanistic ethics and a democratic and enlightened social order. At the educational level, the term “humanistic education” has gained unprecedented popularity as a positive and binding idea. Educational philosophers from the conservative-classical stream view it as an opportunity for restoring education to its former glory and renewing the tradition of the “great books” and the morality of virtues. The supporters of open democratic education regard it as a way of enabling individuals to fulfill themselves in their own unique way and together found free and caring communities. Radical and critical educators see it as a way of narrowing social gaps and advancing the status of weak and oppressed populations. In the schools themselves, the “humanistic” tag is attached as a kind of seal of approval ensuring that almost every initiative is indeed something worthy and respectable. Examples of such initiatives are: education for peace and ecology, releasing the imagination and empowering critical thinking, forming an educational climate of caring and dialogue, democratic and value education, authentic learning through one’s “life-story” and “life-project,” and teaching that employs group and interdisciplinary learning.

Yet, despite all the above, humanistic education at the beginning of the 21st century finds itself embroiled in a deep crisis, far different from those that beset it in the past. It has nothing to do with the persecution and excommunication that were the lot of humanist philosophers and educators throughout the history of the human race, nor has it anything to do with the day-to-day struggle to defend human rights and dignity against the oppressive policies of totalitarian regimes. The evidence presented here vis-à-vis the popularity of humanistic education shows clearly, as does the broad consensus formed around the United Nations Charter on "human rights," that this is a crisis of a different nature. The present crisis has two central characteristics: ideological banality and ethical nihilism.

Banality to thinking is what inflation is to the economy. In both cases the origin of the crisis is not in a lack but rather in excess: torrents of words that say nothing and piles of money that have no purchasing power. The characteristic common to both phenomena is the loss of vitality and specific value (of an ideology in the former, and of currency in the latter) so that the same value, factor or symbol is incapable of making a significant change in reality. In the case of humanistic education, the loss of specific value is manifested in the fact that on the one hand, the greater part of educators displays enthusiastic support for humanistic education, while on the other, when asked about the nature of the humanistic viewpoint and its attendant philosophical and pedagogical principles, the most embarrassing ignorance and confusion become apparent. A lack of knowledge and orientation is revealed, which might be forgivable among lay people, but is unjustifiable among educators who declare their commitment to humanistic education day in, day out.

An example of this can be found in the fact that these days, many identify humanistic education exclusively with the "child-centered pedagogy," which refrains from guiding the children and limits itself to providing them with a "growth-promoting climate." As I will show in the first chapter, while this educational approach, which has its roots in the 18th century doctrine of Jean Jacques Rousseau and its continuation in 20th century humanistic psychology and progressive education, is indeed worthy of the appellation "humanistic," it is by no means the be-all and end-all. A large number of teachers and teacher trainers in the colleges and universities are unaware of the fact that humanistic education was not "born" 150 years ago, but can boast a heritage of 2,500 years. They are oblivious to the fact that until the Modern Era (and some say in our times too) the mainstream in humanistic education did not place the individual at center stage, but rather cultural excellence. They are equally unaware of the fact that it did not set individualistic self-actualization but rather human excellence as its ultimate goal: those intellectual and moral virtues that each person *qua* person should strive to

develop and acquire, since they assist human beings in becoming “more human” and further them towards a full, decent and dignified human life.

Hence the problem of the banalization of humanistic education derives from the current combination of its high public “rating” on the one hand and the superficial and confused attitude towards its nature and implications on the other. The result is that at the beginning of the 21st century we find humanistic education as a symbol which does not symbolize anything; an educational and regulative ideal whose ideas and values have lost the vitality and clarity necessary for guiding a way of life and an educational course that has definitive, differential and well-formed characteristics. However, this fact in itself does not hold the power of disillusionment. If we only conceive of it as important and vital, what we do not know today we can learn tomorrow, and we can apply the lessons of the past to educational work in the near future. But here lies the second pitfall, which is embodied in ethical nihilism; until we surmount this hurdle and deal with it realistically, we will be unable to disengage education from its present crisis.

Nihilism, Nietzsche said, is the ghost that will haunt 20th century humanity. By this Nietzsche meant two different trends. The first is a stance which as a result of skeptical and critical enthusiasm to reveal what is true, just and beautiful, arrives at a radical negation of all that was traditionally regarded as sacred, right and valuable (the modern process of secularizing the world and shattering myths). Nietzsche attributes positive significance to this trend. He compares it to uprooting weeds that have lost their vitality and reproductive force, in order to prepare the (cultural) soil for new, fresh and fertile growth. The second trend expresses intellectual despair and spiritual indolence and is manifested in indifference and cynicism towards intellectual and ethical ideals. He attributes a negative value to this trend, because such spiritual despair stops up and congests those vital human sources that nourish the developmental and elevating processes of human culture.

The second kind of nihilism is particularly relevant to us, as it constitutes a pitfall to the development and renewal of humanistic education. At a more concrete level, the implications of such nihilism are manifested in a lack of interest in broadening and deepening our understanding of the essence of humanistic education beyond the banality of its assortment of clichés. This can be compared to a person whose perception of democracy is exhausted in the principle of “majority government,” but who does not feel the need or obligation to broaden and modify his or her worldview in the face of clear evidence of its superficiality and latent dangers. To give an example from daily life, the very expectation that educators will give an accounting of the intellectual and ethical principles of humanistic education is currently perceived by many as a bothersome demand or a philosophical pain in the neck that is irrelevant to educational and teaching endeavor. Under such

circumstances, no wonder that the majority of teachers are hardly troubled by their ignorance of the theoretical foundations of the very pedagogy which they claim to practice.

Undoubtedly, the concrete level discussed here acquires its meaning from a broad cultural context. Loss of belief in the human spirit and the abandonment of educational ideals of “full humanity” (what the Greeks termed *paideia* and the Romans, *humanitas*) we find, for example, in the following cultural criticism and analyses: Nietzsche foresaw the dominance of “the last man,” who derives the taste of life from materialistic and hedonistic herd-like behavior, and whose minuscule technocratic soul dwarfs everything human on the face of this planet; Matthew Arnold analyzed the empty liberal who fights like a lion for the freedom of expression but displays total indifference towards the content and value of words; Ortega wrote about the noble savage who incessantly specializes in a narrow scientific sphere but totally exempts himself from moral accountability and cultural involvement; Richard Livingston called our times the “criteria lacking” era; Martin Buber drew attention to the danger that lies in individuals being swallowed up in a collective that robs them of their human image and individual identity; Abraham Maslow and Herbert Marcuse (each in his own way) pointed out the individual’s artificial and alienated existence that under the siege of the mass consumer society loses all attentiveness to the inner world; Maxine Greene makes us aware of the majority of teachers who, in the face of our moral and political predicaments, choose to avoid full consciousness and “act as functional and impersonal as machines”; Allan Bloom criticized present-day students who, in the name of cultural relativity and political correctness, relinquish all ethical judgment and educational idealism.

Our post-modern reality provides additional evidence of the loss of belief in the human spirit. For some years there has been talk about the “end of history” and termination of the yearning for alternative visions of the existing social order. The use of traditional humanistic concepts such as wisdom, moral character, spiritual magnitude, and the refinement of taste have been considered not only anachronistic but have also been instantly disparaged as interest-serving and power-abusing. The “ratings” or popular culture has relegated education towards culture to the periphery; the perception of multi-culturalism has eroded the commitment to general and global human values; and the ideal of moral excellence has been sacrificed on the altar of competitive, achievement-oriented go-getting. Tolerance of intellectual and ethical ambiguity reaches new heights daily: in politics that has relinquished ideology in favor of public relations, in commercial television that profits from the methodical stupefying of the public, and in a cultural heroine like Madonna, who presents herself both as a Catholic and a

pornographer, a feminist and a sexual object, as authentic and mechanical – in such a period, belief in a good and decent human life is lost and a *serious* worldview appears to the majority of the public as a totally irrelevant matter. Hence there is no reason to be surprised at the ignorance of numerous educators about humanistic education, not to mention the absence of discontent or a guilty conscience regarding this ignorance.

This book was written as a refusal to accept the educational reality described above. Its point of departure is the awareness that in the contradictory reality of humanistic education – its popularity on the one hand and its emptying of any real content on the other – there is room for far-reaching improvement. The basis for optimism can be understood against the background of the broad context of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This era excels in extremism, and its extremes work simultaneously and forcefully: rationality and science vs. a focus on the unconscious and mysticism, democratization and human rights vs. genocide and oppression of the masses, secularism and enlightenment vs. return to religion and tribalism, the concern of the “Greens” for the flora and fauna vs. systematic damage of the world of nature, the standardization and mechanization of life vs. cultivation of uniqueness and creativity. In the dynamics and dialectics created between these poles there is perhaps no room for overwhelming victories and glorious achievements, but in educational and social initiatives for cultivating human beings and improving the quality of life there are small achievements that can be significant. The hope that there is a promise for educational endeavor, even if its achievements are modest, is what establishes the educator’s space; it is both the motivation and rationale, and the basis of my attempt to offer a contribution that will even slightly restore the vitality of humanistic education and promote the enhancement of contemporary humanity.

The first chapter will review the milestones and central approaches of humanistic education from the days of classical Athens, 2,500 years ago, through our times, in the beginning of the 21st century. I will begin with the “initial question” about “how to be a human being,” and continue with a historical and philosophical review of the ideals, ideas, values and ways of education and teaching which established humanistic education’s thinking and praxis over the ages. In this review I will propose differentiating between four main approaches: (1) a classical-cultural approach which begins in ancient Greece and continues in various forms in Rome, the Renaissance, and the New Era until the present day; (2) a romantic-naturalistic approach born in the educational philosophy of Rousseau, whose contemporary manifestations can be found in progressive education and humanistic psychology; (3) an existential approach built on existential and phenomenological literature and research; and (4) the radical-critical

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