

## Chapter III

# EDUCATION TOWARDS HUMANISTIC MORALITY IN AN ERA OF VALUE CRISIS

*By three things is the world sustained: by truth, by justice and by peace.*

Simeon ben Gamliel

*Where I could not be honest, I never yet was valiant.*

Shakespeare

*The highest good of those who follow virtue is common to all, and therefore all can equally rejoice therein.*

Spinoza

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it.*

Marx

*The important thing is not, as yet, to go to the root of things, but the world being what it is, to know how to live in it.*

Camus

## 1. POINT OF DEPARTURE

In this chapter I seek to present an outline of a conception of moral education that expresses the spirit and principles of the humanistic worldview, and to locate it in our daily and concrete reality – in a period which due to its modern-post-modern characteristics is termed by many, “an era of value crisis.” I do not wish to reinvent the wheel of morality or presume to have devised far-reaching innovations in my method of moral education, but rather to somewhat refurbish some of its components and integrate them into new orders and structures so that the “morality wagon” will be suitable to the present day and will efficiently serve us in the domains of moral education.

Despite my modest goal, the challenge is of the utmost importance: restoring vitality and meaning to the discourse of morality, to which on the one hand (almost) everyone accords supreme importance (therefore incessantly argues about its role in the formation of the image of the individual and society), while on the other, (almost) everyone regards it as

lacking objective foundations, as if it is all a matter of personal taste, thus rendering it sterile, superfluous and burdensome. I therefore believe that success in enriching the moral discussion with vitality and meaning can contribute to the most practical matters with which those dealing with the educational endeavor and teaching have to cope, day in and day out.

Since we usually ground the majority of our arguments in the discourse on morality on some primary principles – beliefs, values, intuitions and assumptions regarding the nature of humankind – it is crucial from the outset to openly assume them; in other words, we should present the primary principles that will serve us as the central axes of our discussion.

“Showing our hand” at the outset is not only logically and technically important (as a strategy for developing arguments), but also bears ethical importance as it expresses a commitment to critical consciousness and intellectual integrity. It manifests the idea that no moral position is engraved in stone, but is rather the result of human thought and creation. It further suggests that “no person speaks from nowhere,” but rather from an affinity to a certain philosophical or cultural tradition, and that all progress in ethical discourse mandates a basic agreement on the part of the participants regarding certain basic principles related both to content (such as the sanctity of life and the equality of the value of humankind) and form (such as freedom of expression and the obligation to provide reasoning). With regard to the primary principles per se, which I seek to accept as the basic assumptions for the entire discussion, these are grounded in the *weltanschauung* that was presented in the previous chapter, and comprise (1) a humanistic worldview; (2) a democratic approach, with regard to the desirable political order; (3) an enlightened intellectual approach towards the pursuit of truth and resolution of social disputes.

(1) As we have seen in the previous chapter *the humanistic worldview* maintains that the development, well-being and dignity of human beings should be regarded as the ultimate goal of human thinking and endeavor. It regards human beings as free individuals who establish their own world and are responsible for their destiny, and accords to all people unconditional and equal self-value, as free, thinking, moral, creative and singular entities. As a worldview it also aspires to social justice grounded in the sanctity of human life, equality before the law and equal opportunity, the love of humankind, respect for individual freedom, and solidarity between people and nations.

(2) *The democratic approach* is not confined, as many erroneously tend to think, to “majority rule.” If we were to seek short and succinct formulations, it would be better to use the literal meaning of “government of the people,” to take Lincoln’s famous statement that democracy is the “government of the people, by the people and for the people,” or the statement (which I like best) that democracy is *the government of free and*

*equal citizens who form together – in manners that are fair, pluralistic and tolerant – the character and customs of their society.* In our context it is important to examine the necessary characteristics of contemporary liberal and pluralistic democracy: (a) the source of the legitimacy and authority of government is the citizens of the state; (b) all society's adults are free citizens who enjoy human and political rights; (c) periodic free elections are held under this regime; (d) government policy is determined by majority decisions made by the elected representatives of the people (when the majority does not have the right to impair the three previous principles).

(3) *An enlightened intellectual approach* is characterized first by inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, broad-mindedness, critical and autonomous thinking, pluralism and tolerance. It has its foundations in an awareness that truth has numerous facets and variations, that no belief or position is resistant to error, that all human beings have the right to believe in their own truth and justice and act towards their personal fulfillment. It further implies that, on the one hand, no person or group should be permitted to hold a monopoly over what is true, just and proper, while on the other, scientific research and ethical discourse should be conducted with openness, by employing a rational and critical approach, and a willingness to resolve disagreements on the basis of the most valid knowledge at our disposal at any given time.

These three primary principles were not chosen by chance. They express, as they were presented at length in the two previous chapters, the humanistic and democratic ideals that constituted the main social contracts of modern times: the United States "Declaration of Independence," in the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen," and in the United Nations "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and "Declaration of the Rights of the Child. These historical facts have particular relevance to our discussion.

In order to succeed in advancing moral education it is not enough that we think that our basic principles are defensible per se on a purely moral basis, but there should also be wide agreement on the part of the public and a willingness to cooperate. In other words, the fact that the principles of humanism, democracy and enlightenment have been accorded high rank among the community of nations over the years, will on the one hand facilitate their being accepted as the central axes and delineating boundaries of my proposal vis-à-vis the image of desirable moral education in our times; on the other hand it also constitutes certain support for my argument that any racial, power-abusing or other position that a priori denies certain populations equal opportunities for enjoying full and dignified human life, should be disqualified as illegitimate.



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