Human flourishing, teaching and education in a market society

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Abstract

What do we value in education today, and what does this tell us about how we understand the purpose of education in the modern world? In an age of what Ronald Barnett calls 'super-complexity,' where knowing a lot about a little is seen as a marketplace survival tactic, the essentially humane and humanising nature of education is being suffocated; what is gaining dominance, instead, is a scientistic, technicist distortion of what it means to know, and of what it means to educate. In this paper, I posit that the contemporary focus on education as *techne* (that is, as Aristotle's efficiency and effectiveness) rather than as *phroenesis* (as practical wisdom) has led us to a point where many in society hold a quasi-deontic understanding of what it means to educate. Education is no longer primarily about the development of the person as a total course - about what Paulo Freire famously called our ontological vocation to become more fully human. Rather, education is fast becoming (and perhaps has already become) chiefly focused on 'the learner' and their need to survive in the marketplace. Our focus on rules and obligations in education, on preparing students to meet the needs of a market society rather than the needs of the total person, denies the essentially virtue-ethical nature of education. The upshot of all this, I argue, is that a neo-liberal ethics of the market can exact nothing other than the anaesthetising domestication of the student, which goes against the philosophical, virtue-ethical notion that education should be entirely about human flourishing.

Key Words: virtue ethics, humanistic education, deontic, neo-liberalism, *techne*, *phroensis*

Introduction

Few would deny the importance of educating for survival in the marketplace: kids must have jobs if they are to get anywhere in life, we believe, so we train them up in the hope that they will attain some level of success in our employment-driven society. This is seen both as the right and the good thing to do. But where does such thinking about the purpose of education leave the human person as a *whole* human person? That is, as a person who is meaningfully *with* the world and *with* others, as Freire would put it.[1] This paper argues that, in an era of what Ronald Barnett calls 'supercomplexity,'[2] education as a fundamentally humane and humanising endeavour is being elided by a neo-liberal market ethic that has the technicist, scientistic 'training' of the atomised individual, rather than the education of the whole person (on an ideal account), as its focus. This exposes, I suggest, a quasi-deontic understanding of the nature and purpose of education, in which we focus more on rights, duties and obligations in education, than we do on the aretaic notion of education as being about and for human flourishing. This leads us to take what is seemingly our only option, the 'domestication' of the student for externally imposed, market-driven purposes. The result is the denial of the learner as a total course who can be raised, as Freire would say, to critical consciousness through an awareness of their own historicity, an awareness of their own humanness.[3]

In trying to get at this argument, I begin with what might seem a simple proposition to readers of ethical philosophy or those interested in the philosophy of education, but

[1]P Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, London, 1996 [1970].
[2]R Barnett, *Beyond All Reason: Living with Ideology in the University*, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, Buckingham, 2003.
[3]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

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one that I nevertheless feel needs reiterating in the current discussion. That is, that education is a moral endeavour that is humane and humanising. I then show that teaching today has been largely reduced to *techne*, the Aristotelian notion of efficiency and effectiveness - of technical capacity - rather than *phronesis*, or practical wisdom,[4] and I point to the scientistic, sterile attitude we present towards education in general, and to the technicist attitude towards teaching practice in particular. Finally, I argue that, compounded by the emergence of neo-liberalism, these moribund, quasi-deontic perspectives on teaching and education have suppressed the notion that education is really about human flourishing - not about base-line survival in an anti-human, market economy.

The Humane and Humanising in Education

I take as my first principle that education is a profoundly moral endeavour because it benefits human persons and, through them, humankind. On this view, education's only genuine *telos* is human flourishing: education is humane and humanising. Of course, I cannot pretend that any of this might be new to readers. Aristotle, Socrates and Cicero all knew this truth, as did Vico, the latter of whom demonstrated as much some three hundred years ago in his Orations on humanistic education.[5] Indeed, Vico presents us with a good starting point for a discussion about the moral purposes of education in more modern times. In a very lucid analysis of Vico's thought, Verene identifies *paideia*, the Greek notion of the formation of the human person as a "total course," as being one of the major themes in the Orations.[6] This is particularly evident in Oration I, which discusses the humanistic goal of self-knowledge in education. Vico's rejection of the notion that the educational process can be reduced to curriculum-led study of content can be seen when he points to humanity's natural inclination for learning. He states that we

> ... do not aspire merely to a kind of popular and superficial erudtion for pure ostentation but strive with discipline and dedicated diligence to aquire a deeper, varied, and manifold understanding of things.[7]

Vico has a determined belief that we are 'born for wisdom,'[8] and in this way his ideas about the moral *telos* of education have resonance with a more recent humanistic educator, namely Paulo Freire. Freire's work is strongly methodological in tone and perhaps this is why so many educators have found it useful at both the theoretical and practical levels. Indeed, it is in the praxis that Freire identifies the process of education as being a creative, transformative one that raises a person's critical consciousness to the point where they realise their right to 'name the world' and 'say their own word'.[9] Education for Freire is always democratic and curious,[10] and never

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[4]Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, Penguin, London, 1976 [1953].
[5]G Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations 1699 - 1707)*, trans. G. A. Pinton & A. W. Shippee, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993.
[6]D P Verene, 'Introduction: On Humanistic Education', in G Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations 1699 - 1707)*, trans. G. A. Pinton & A. W. Shippee, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993, p. 14.
[7]Vico, *Orations*, p. 36.
[8]Vico, *Orations*, p. 40.
[9]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

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about the mindless memorisation of facts.[11] He rebukes any education that stifles inquiry and creativity, or that merely transmits content or 'communiques' to the student-as-object.[12] Such a concept of education is not truly human, he believes, and assumes a "dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others."[13] Education must not seek to domesticate or adapt persons, says Friere. Rather, it must be dialogical: it must allow the encounter of human persons in the world and with the world so that they may grasp it intellectually as something that is knowable and transformable.[14] In other words, dialogical, positive human action is fundamental to the truth of the moral purpose of education.

This is where the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* can be of some use. Teaching, as an educative act, must rely on practical and wise reflection on the moral character of education and its goal of human flourishing if it is to avoid anti-humanist practice. Fenstermacher, in a very sensible analysis of the moral considerations of teaching as a profession, argues that teaching is "human action undertaken in regard to other human beings. Thus, matters of what is fair, right, just, and virtuous are always present."[15] He further asks, "[H]ow is it possible to conceive of teaching disconnected from its moral underpinnings?"[16] The moral nature of the whole endeavour of education thus implicates the moral nature of the activity of teaching (and vice versa). In this sense, teaching is always about positive and moral human association. *Phronesis* in teaching is demonstrated in the judgement that teachers exhibit when they choose what will they teach and why they will teach it, that is, in deciding that it is right and good for the student to know a particular thing because their life will be enriched for knowing it.[17] In considering the moral goodness of teaching a person a thing, we assume that we are changing people for the better, thus allowing students to engage in the world to live a flourishing life.[18]

Freire takes up this notion in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, where he argues that educators need to be open-minded and foster a knowledge of teaching as being uncommonly human in nature, one where we "cannot afford to ignore anything that concerns human persons."[19] It is the responsibility of teachers, then, in the educative enterprise, to challenge students to know and live in and be open to their own world, which they have created through a critical consciousness of their own subjectivity and historicity. Thus, in *phronesis*, the teacher's critical reflections must be always reflected in praxis - in the space where humans intervene in and change the world - and never descend to the levels of verbalism or activism (what might be thought of as respectively 'not-

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[10]P Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2001 [1998].
[11]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 61.
[12]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, ch. 2.
[13]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 56, emphasis in original.
[14]Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 110; Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, p. 53.
[15]G D Fenstermacher, 'Some Moral Considerations on Teaching as a profession', in J. I. Goodlad, R. Soder, & K. A. Sirotnik (eds) *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1990, p. 133.
[16]Fenstermacher, p. 132.
[17]D T Hansen, 'The Moral is in the Practice'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 14, no. 6, 1998, p. 648.
[18]Hansen, p. 648.
[19]Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, p. 127.

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theory' and 'not-practice').[20] This is what it means to moral, and to be coherent and human.

However, such humanity, along with the right and the good, does not appear to be a large theme in today's higher educational and teaching practice in Australia. Indeed, we could go so far as to say that in Australian higher ed. the focus is not on *phronesis* but on its Aristotelian companion *techne*, as if the educational enterprise can be reduced to so much effectiveness and efficiency, as if it could be adequately understood and accomplished if only we were to do enough 'scientific' research on procedure and method. But perhaps this is not limited to the Australian context. Writing over fifteen years ago in the context of teacher professionalisation, Fenstermacher doubted even then that either policy-makers in the United States or the teaching profession itself had a sense of the moral meaning of teaching.[21] He pointed to contemporary fixations on grading competence, effectiveness, performance; on accountability, results, testing; that is to say, on the 'technical', 'measurable' aspects of education and teaching. More recently, Macedo has bemoaned the ideological dominance of scientistic conceptualisations of education as a whole, which has led to an anti-intellectualist educational situation that subordinates theory and knowledge to efficiency and technical mastery of content.[22] Elsewhere, he argues that such an education - one that is "mindless and skills-based", one that is driven by market pragmatism - has led to the sacrifice of social and political critique and the anaesthetisation of students' minds.[23] Verene similarly wonders where the humanist *telos* in modern education has disappeared to when he eloquently argues that there "is no commonly perceived ideal of modern education, unless it is simply to attempt to organize things so as to have people move along with technology, to train the mind and socialize the spirit to a world of techniques".[24] Perhaps, though, it is Aronowitz who best encapsulates the current, melancholy predicament of education when he simply states that “techno-scientific training has been elevated to the pedagogic norm”.[25]

Scientism, technicism and the obligations of education

Given these unhappy reflections from major educational scholars, it would be difficult for anyone concerned about moral and educational responsiblities for the formation of human persons to disagree with the proposition that education today suffers for its lack of humanity. But it would not be correct to infer, as some might, that this state of affairs is inherent in a scientific approach to education. Science - that is, *truthful* science - is critical and creative, not positivistic and reproductive. Rather, what we have presently is a corrupt understanding of what it *means to be scientific* and it is this that has deposited us at this point, to a moment where empiricism, technicism,

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[20]Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, p. 30.
[21]Fenstermacher, pp. 130 - 131.
[22]D Macedo, 'Foreword' in P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2001 [1998], pp xiii - xx.
[23]D Macedo, 'Introduction' in N. Chomsky, *Chomsky on MisEducation*, edited and introduced by D. Macedo, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2004 [2000], p. 4.
[24]Verene p. 10.
[25]S Aronowitz, 'Introduction' in P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom. Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2001 [1998], p. 7).

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‘method’, and measurability are exalted to a *scientistic* 'neutrality'. It is as if this neutrality can somehow explain or help us understand the complex, convoluted, intricate, intimate educational enterprise through a pretense of intellect, through a misreading of what true science is, through a denial of the beauty of human flourishing. The instant in which we find ourselves is one where the higher educational enterprise is not one about human persons, but rather is one that is is reductionist, determinist, skills-based, and curriculum-led. It is a place where neo-liberal educational doctrine feels quite at home, where transmission teaching is submitted as being both right and good, and where the atomisation of the human person is completely necessary if one is to 'succeed' in a market-driven world. Carr takes up this topic when he observes that recent debates in education have concentrated around both measurable, technical skills and “whether market provision makes good socio-economic sense”.[26] Such attitudes to education are centred on fulfilling the limited economic demands of society, not the humane wants of the student. Freire, too, is caustic in his analysis of neoliberal thought, identifying the “cynical fatalism”of its ideology and how this has led to an ethics of the marketplace and not to a universal ethics of the human person.[27] Of course, teaching has not been immune to this market ethics, and now the training of individuals for discrete ends has replaced the education of the total person.

However, because of our apparently 'scientific' (in reality, 'scientistic') attitude to the *techne* of teaching, some might argue that we have a very post-Kantian understanding of our duties and obligations in respect to the humanising of autonomous persons: that is, we have a contractual, service-oriented, obedient perspective on our task. On this understanding - a deontic understanding - our approach to education would be based on observable, palpable, consistent and rational truths of what is the right and the good in the building of whole persons. It would be true in this instance to state that in acting ‘deontically’, I can yet be engaged in the humane and humanising educational project and my science can be truly critical. But on our neo-liberal, *scientistic* understanding of teaching, it would be mistaken to say that, in only fulfilling my obligations and duties to train students for participation in the marketplace, I am acting deontically. Rather, I argue that such an attitude can only ever be *quasi-deontic* in nature, as I am no longer involved in a humane and humanising enterprise dedicated to whole persons, but only in one that singularly ‘prepares’ people for the jobs market. My obligations to my fellow humans are now determined not by the humanising requirements of my students, but by the dehumanising requirements of a neoliberal, market economy.

Of course, this is not to suggest that all teaching in education exhibits such a quasi-deontic understanding of educational ethics, or that all teachers are so unimaginative, feeble and ductile as to accept their so-called obligations and responsibilities with neoliberal oblivion. Notwithstanding this, many of us tend to rely on - *what should be* - rational, self-evident codes of practice and and policy statements that set out our moral obligations to our fellow humans. In reality, however, these codes of practice are only quasi-deontic, for they are based on a market ethic of technicist instruction that will 'get the student through', rather than a universal human ethic that elevates

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[26]D Carr, 'Education, Profession and Culture: Some Conceptual Questions'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol 48, no 3, September 2000, p. 250.
[27]Freire, *Freedom*, pp. 113 - 114.

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human flourishing above the jobs market. This is not, of course, to imply that 'technical' training is not an important part of any curriculum: to live a flourishing life in the modern world necessarily requires schooling in technique as well as an ability to understand how society functions. A total education must, by definition, include elements of technical training if humans are, indeed, to flourish - but this training must never come at the expense of the appreciation of the student as a total course. Put differently, 'pure' instruction is not actually doing the job of helping students to lead prosperous lives in the long run. Without a focus on whole people, we are setting our students up for lives lived in a state of hopelessness, where some magical or mythicised authority outside the individual always holds sway. The seemingly total emphasis that we have on technical conversations are to the detriment of full and proper theoretical, critical, intellectual philosophical and moral engagement with both teaching and education. The quasi-deontic ethical system in which we work might very well contribute to what Herb Kohl would identify as our 'stupidity' as teachers but does not excuse us, as teachers and thinkers, for taking the easy path of having neoliberal goods and rights legislated for in our educative and professional practice.[28] We cannot offload responsibility so easily.

How to avoid this ghastly scenario? The answer must lie in the raising of consciousness amongst teachers about the innately virtue-ethical, 'pre-theoretical' nature of teaching.[29] Good teaching cannot be legislated for and it cannot be imposed from outside - rather, its qualities are aretaic, that is, based on judgement. An aretaic view of education describes an arc of the moral virtues required of teachers - of courage, patience, love, compassion, respect, humility, hope. It also implies that moral character and sensitivity to others is 'internally' formed - although still directed by some rational moral criteria - and not necessarily obedient to externally imposed rules and principles.[30] And in defending a virtue-ethical understanding of teaching and education, we find that it is impossible to tolerate a view that accommodates peripheral demands determined by neoliberal, market-focused governments, institutions, or corporations.

The incompatibility of building whole persons with the domesticating approach to education

Quasi-deontic understandings of the purpose and nature of teaching and education should have tremendous implications for how we go about the pedagogical task in the academy as a whole. Most importantly, perhaps, a quasi-deontic misunderstanding of the ethical nature of teaching - one that has at its centre the preparation of students for participation in the marketplace, and not human flourishing - can only ever lead to the domestication (and subsequent dehumanising) of students. This domestication is most efficiently carried out through technicist instruction (which, by virtue of its *not* being teaching, is a rather simple operation to perform). Technicist direction cannot be critical; it is exclusively reproductive and can only ever be carried out by instructors,

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[28]H Kohl, *Stupidity and Tears: Teaching and Learning in Troubled Times*, The New Press, New York, 2003.
[29]D Carr, 'Personal and Interpersonal Relationships in Education and Teaching: A Virtue Ethical Perspective'. *British Journal of Educational Studies* vol. 53, no. 3, September 2005, pp. 255 - 271.
[30]ibid., p. 259.

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technicians, or trainers - by the functionaries of a system that demands 'graduate outcomes', 'learning outcomes', and knowledge management' - not by people engaged in the practice of teaching, in the undertaking of truthful education. This is 'transmission' teaching at its worst and it displays gratification in the reduction of students to ahistorical, 'dead things' (if I may borrow Alfred North White's turn of phrase). To dispute a fellow human's right to live a flourishing life - indeed, as a 'teacher', to be *actively engaged* in obstructing, thwarting, impeding that right, when my virtue-ethical responsiblility to nurture a student's humanity is unambiguous - is unconscionable. Technicist 'teaching' infers a passive, silent student and aims for quiescence, not totality. It is not possible to believe that as a teacher I am doing right and good in domesticating students for deterministic purposes; as Freire states, "Right thinking cannot be separated from coherent, lived practice. It is absurd for teachers to imagine that they are engaged in right thinking and at the same time to relate to the student in a patronizing way."[31] This means that the student is integral to the pedagogical relationship, and not simply an object of instruction.

Technicist approaches to teaching reduce teachers to acts of imposing 'official truths' on students,[32] truths that have been determined by the expedient demands of a neoliberal market ethics. In the disciplines, students are customarily trained into discipline-specific ways of doing things, but this does not mean that they are being automatically prepared for the jobs market. As most disciplines include some level of critique in their discourse (although not all are 'critical' disciplines in the sense implied by critical social theory), there is thus usually some education for critical consciousness going on. But domestication can never be reconciled with truthful education. Teachers must be exceedingly careful not to deceive themselves into believing that their consciences are clear whenever they engage in domesticating acts of instruction for external designs. Domestication is neither right nor good, neither humane nor humanising, neither morally nor ethically sustainable.

Conclusion

As educators, thinkers, teachers, we must be constantly aware of the possibility of our failing in our responsiblities as people who are engaged in a particularly human enterprise. Such an enterprise must, by its very nature, respect the autonomy and creativity of the learner, and the virtue-ethical judgement of the teacher. This allows no room for blindly following rules; rather, it means creating for oneself a moral conscience, a virtue-ethical understanding of teaching and education. Of course, it might be possible that a truly deontic understanding of the moral nature of teaching *can* sustain the humanising project of education. However, we are at a stage in modern education where fulfilling one's rights and obligations as a teacher means following very particular, sometimes-irrational, quasi-deontic rules, and the true educational goal of human flourishing is becoming lost to a neoliberal market ethic. On this analysis, it seems that any educational ethic that claims to appeal to rational, self-evident truths will be dishonest so long as we are ensnared in the objectivising and silencing heteronomy of neoliberal inevitability.

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[31]Freire, *Freedom*, p. 40.
[32]Macedo, *Chomsky*, p. 4.

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