

**THE ART OF HUMANE EDUCATION BY DONALD
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Reviewed by Anthony Roda

In *The Art of Humane Education* Donald Philip Verene paints an unflattering picture of the state of the liberal arts (humane learning) in the modern university. He then defends and praises a common core of great books with which to provide a humane education. It is the kind of vision once advocated at the University of Chicago.

Verene's views echo the Renaissance humanists ideals inspired in part by Cicero and he compliments these ideals with those of the Platonic Socrates of the early dialogues. By using the device of letters to a friend he evokes care and intimacy and establishes a sense of mutual concern with the reader. It is an effort to initiate a genuine reflection on the purpose (*telos*) of the humanities, i.e. philosophy, history, languages and literature (arts, letters and morals). For Professor Verene this end (*telos*) is equated to the Socratic ideal, "know thyself" and may be realized when "the self attempts to speak about itself." [Verene, *The Art of Humane Education*, p. xi] However, his single-minded concern exhibits an anti-pragmatic bias and yet his view is not unlike John Dewey's characterization of morals viewed broadly. In the "Foreword to the Modern Library Edition" of *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey calls attention to David Hume's constructive idea that

"a knowledge of human nature provides a map or chart of all humane and social subjects, and that with this chart in our possession we can find our way intelligently about through all the complexities of the phenomena of economics, politics, religious beliefs, etc. Indeed, he went further, and held that human nature gives also the key to the sci-

ences of the physical world, since when all is said and done they are also the products of the workings of the human mind.” [Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. vi]

Of course Dewey hastens to add that Hume ignored or did not give “social conditions and institutions” their due [Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, p. vii]. However it should be sufficiently clear that Verene and Dewey do not have a major disagreement concerning the approach to understanding the self. Verene’s “trellis upon which all else can be placed” is compatible with Dewey’s “map or chart” with which to navigate the landscape of the self.

The “trellis” or the “chart” for Verene is a way of saving the idea of a flexible “canon.” He argues for the need of a common core that will make discourse possible, a core that gives rise to a communal sense that human beings may use as a way of “making sense together.” It is the making of a common language and a discourse that reveals us to ourselves. The idea of a “canon” suggests a claim that some works (books) are so critical and so central that without these we fail to understand ourselves; we see ourselves as though through a glass darkly, if at all. Verene states that these works “focus on images of the self and thus allow for an immediate engagement of the reader.” [Verene, *The Art of Humane Education*, p. 65] In the West these images flow from the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman tradition. At the heart of these one finds works such as the books of Moses, *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*, the Gospels, Homer’s *Odyssey*, and readings from the *Digest* of Roman law. Verene also suggests another alternative variation on the same theme with seven specific works: the *Book of Job*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, some early Platonic dialogues (*Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro* and *Phaedo*), Dante’s *Inferno*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, Goethe’s *Faust* and Freud’s *Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. As I review these I am reminded of George Santayana’s *Three Philosophical Poets* which gives an overview of three ways of organizing human experience: materialism (Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*), supernaturalism (Dante’s *Divine Comedy*) and romanticism (Goethe’s *Faust*). I can imagine that in hands of a humanist of Verene’s temper these would

provide a compelling way of introducing images of the self.

Professor Verene is not inflexible in the choices of these critical works. However, he recognizes a distinct difference between works that continue to captivate and provoke us and works which have only a fleeting interest. The former have staying power and stimulate us to think about the human condition. One can imagine Freud reading and re-reading Sophocles' *Oedipus* as well as Plato's *Republic*. Such works should be approached with consideration and care. The word Verene uses is "piety," which Vico considers the *sine qua non* for wisdom as he states in the last phrase of his *The New Science*, "he who is not pious cannot be truly wise." [Vico, *The New Science*, p. 384 in Bergin and Fisch] This must not be a slavish piety and Verene recognizes that sometimes one must shout out that "the emperor has no clothes." His recognition of the importance of "eccentricity" the need "of forming one's canon against a larger tradition," and the "lifelong process of revision" call to mind Emerson's *The American Scholar*. There are striking similarities as well as contrasts between Emerson and Verene. What Verene expects from "pedagogical eloquence," to delight, instruct and move, is not unlike the duties Emerson assigns to the scholar: "The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances." [Emerson, *The American Scholar*, p. 112 in Lindeman]

It seems as though both Emerson and Verene have drunk from the same springs. Both are in essential agreement with respect to purpose (*telos*), and both might recommend similar strategies with respect to "how to teach," the concern of Verene's first two letters. However, regarding "what to teach," the focus of the last two letters, there is agreement between Emerson and Verene, but Emerson does not allow "Memory" or what he calls the "mind of the Past" to swallow everything. The idea of the "canon" or what Emerson calls the "mind of the Past" is only one of the three major influences upon the "mind of the scholar" the other two being "nature" and "action." I suspect for Emerson, this serves the purpose of guarding against the solipsistic circle which arises from the misuse of books, the major influence

from the past. Emerson warns that “Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst.” [Emerson, *The American Scholar*, p. 107 in Lindeman] Yet, I suspect that Verene would recognize the wisdom of Emerson’s statement and agree with it. Verene’s gloss on Aristotle’s *On Memory* suggests as much “All images upon which the artist and humanist thinker can draw are in memory and were at one time in perception.” [Verene, *The Art of Humane Education*, p. 52] “Perception” points toward nature and action, the other two major influences on the mind of the scholar. It also evokes Vico’s insight concerning the relation between doing and knowing. Emerson in his quotable fashion puts the matter thus: “Only so much do I know, as I have lived.” [Emerson, *The American Scholar*, p. 109 in Lindeman]

I have been straying from Professor Verene’s central message which is to call attention and try to recover the original end (*telos*) or purpose of a humane education. He finds that many other activities have crowded in, distracted and finally displaced the *telos* of the liberal studies in the modern university. Activities such as food services, student activities, administrative services, laundries etc, etc. in themselves beneficent, once subsidiary are now the masters and driving force of the modern university. Verene urges the claim that once these activities were at the service of the Republic of Letters whereas now they direct it. His statement captures this state of affairs far more eloquently than I:

“The modern university is not a community of scholars but a corporation with a managerial class composed of academics who have left teaching not to return or who received degrees and never taught at all but went directly into administration. These and other professionals make up a class of their own, with their national organizations, publications, careers, and awards.” [Verene, *The Art of Humane Education*, p. 24]

If one were a Vichian it would be possible to argue that the modern university merely reflects the “age of the corporation” with

its corporate logic, corporate poetry, corporate theology, etc. etc. along with all of its other corporate cultural expressions and institutions. Humanity would have to wait out the unwinding of this corporate age until the dawning of a new age. But, I suspect that Verene wants to remind us of something else something that Plato tried to show long ago in *The Republic* and his other dialogues, namely, that when a shepherd is calculating how much he can earn from butchering his sheep he ceases being a shepherd and turns into a business man. Understanding this difference has considerable consequences on how one goes about pursuing these different though related ends. Plato goes to great lengths to tease out and expand on the relation between arts and functions. For example the physician's function (*telos*) is to bring about health in his patients. The question of profit or salary however important is not the function of a physician insofar as one is a physician. Professor Verene would argue analogously that the end (*telos*) of a humane education is to "know oneself" not to promote a corporation which might even conspire against knowledge of oneself.

The Socratic adage "know thyself" is as relevant now, perhaps more so, as it was 2,500 years ago. Through discourse (dialogue) the ever present Socrates of Plato's dialogues annoys, provokes, irritates, berates and by turns confuses and defuses the other participants of the dialogues and ourselves. As we follow the twists and turns of what at first appears a haphazard and rambling conversation we come to understand ourselves, as well as our hidden motives, agendas, and secrets of our own mind. We are thus enabled to see ourselves, aware of our frailties and limitations openly admitting our ignorance and conducting ourselves accordingly.

The dialogue, in contrast to the monologue, in the hands of Plato was turned into the process of inquiry *par excellence*. Plato's dialogues captured the social conditions of full-blooded personalities. The Socrates of the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo* insisted on his social context and destiny. He was bounded and intertwined with the Athenian community to the bitter draught. For Plato and Aristotle it was foolish to speak of the individual apart from the community.

As Aristotle said aloneness was meant only for a god or a non-human animal. A view that so integrates the individual with the community requires that the word (*logos*) work with the dignity essential for it to carry the burden of its truth. When words are humiliated and debased by gimmicks and other clever tricks of imposters they fail in their essential task.

Human projects that depend on the dignity of the word (*logos*) such as the laws fail and become unmoored; and, unmoored captures Professor Verene's account of the present state of the humanities.

In response he offers the view that a humane education based on the principles of eloquence in the spirit of the Renaissance humanists can rise to the task and deal with a literary tradition which has been unmoored from its Archimedean point, Augustine's Deity as a resting place or even Dante's love that moves the sun and all the stars. Renato Barilli's characterization of the early humanists: "They do not rush to eulogize solitude in the woods, but more effectively rediscover the dignity of the forum, of engagement in the affairs of the state and the community" [Barilli, *Rhetoric*, p. 56] seems to be a way for academia to reclaim its *telos*, its humanizing mission. However, I am not sure that Professor Verene would be in complete agreement here. Nonetheless, it would conform to Cicero's emphasis on "praxis over theory, of *negotium* over *otium*." [Barilli, *Rhetoric*, p. 56]

Many in academia have little or no convictions regarding the value of their activity; consequently, they have harmed themselves and have renounced their responsibility to the community. They have removed themselves to the fringes or boundaries of the social order. In short they have marginalized themselves while those who have not marginalized themselves serve at the behest of the corporate university.

Professor Verene has given us a rare statement on the purpose of *The Art of Humane Education* and it should be obvious that I was moved, instructed and delighted by it. Our differences should be apparent but in underscoring the fundamental elements and *sine qua non*

of pedagogy – the subject matter, the teacher and the student – there is no room for disagreement. Whatever, obfuscates or frustrates this special dynamics is suspect. If for no other reason than to call attention to these fundamental elements – the subject matter, the teacher and the student – Professor Verene’s book should be placed in hands of all practicing and prospective teachers and anyone else who has a stake in pedagogy.

As I close this review I would like to raise a question about the nature of art since it looms large in Professor Verene’s title. An account of this process is relevant to how one approaches and engages the self. Is the process merely one of discovery, i.e. finding what is already there in finished form or is it one of creation, i.e. bringing into being something more than what is given? In short, is there some element of play, of sport, of freedom? R. G. Collingwood’s analysis of art as craft and art as imaginative expression in *The Principles of Art* would be a good starting point. Perhaps another way of approaching the same issue would be to ask the question of James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Did Stephen Dedalus discover the artist or did he create the artist? Such considerations would, I suggest, inform not only how one approaches the humanities but also how prominent a role one attaches to memory.

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