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A RESPONSE TO MAXINE GREENE'S 'COGNITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS:
THE HUMANITIES AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER'
by
George C. Simmons

My remarks will be confined to the latter part of the title of Professor Greene's paper, 'The Humanities and the Elementary School Teacher.' I am aware that the colon is used to signify antithesis or illustration, or as Fowler says, "that of delivering the goods that have been invoiced in the preceding words." If the title were laid out in strict grammatical form, one could of course insist that since I understood the apodosis, I should have understood the protasis. But I make no claim to be able to speak with any confidence on "cognition and consciousness," even though I do cognize and am conscious; I do make a claim to having some concern for the humanities and to have been initiated into the academic world through the humanities, specifically through one of the classical languages and literature. My references, therefore, will be quite different from those of Professor Greene, but our views are somewhat, though not entirely, compatible.

Professor Greene proposed to speak "with self-awareness, clarity, and sympathy" and, in my judgment, accomplished two of these goals with conspicuous success. With clarity, indeed with perspicacity, she has spoken. Compassion and sympathy abound in her paper and her sympathy for teachers puts the Athenians to shame for, as you might be aware, when one dropped out of circulation in ancient Athens, it was said of him that either he had died or had become ho grammatis, an elementary school teacher.

Sympathy has always been in short supply, with its opposites flooding the market, and elementary school teachers have too often been looked upon as "personnel defined by a professional specialty." Endorsing this spirit of sympathy, I am reminded of the words of Sarpedon to Glauce in the Iliad: "hiomen", he said, meaning, "let us go forward," or, as some might say, "right on!"

The third characterization of the paper, that of "self-awareness" poses a problem for me. That term, like the term "self-consciousness," or the sentence "I exist," or the phrase "persons becoming conscious of themselves," resides in a cloudy and indeterminate realm. It is at best imprecise, or as A. J. Ayer says, "peculiar and degenerate." Statements such as "I exist," "I am conscious" do not express genuine propositions. It can indeed be asked, what is the term "self-consciousness" describing; Ayer claims that the term describes nothing and "is merely an expression of the tautology that if a description is complete there is nothing left to be described." Surely it is the case that if one claims to be conscious one is bound to be right; but this does not mean that one is in some particular state of mind which confers infallibility upon one. It is the case, as Ayer has said, "that if he is in any conscious state whatever, he must be conscious." and if he is
conscious he must be conscious of himself.

I will raise one further question about this phrase “becoming conscious of oneself” and then I shall let the matter rest. Is the “self” different from the “one,” or is the self the ghost in the one? I am sure that Professor Greene can clarify these points for us.

Professor Greene eloquently describes the tasks of the teacher as that of “teaching skills to the young, moulding them, guiding them, and trying to set them free.” I do not want to be captious, but I think that it would be an error on the part of the teacher to perceive of herself/himself as being engaged in a work of “moulding,” and a fortiori, it would be an error for us to construe of the work of the teacher in that light.

The metaphor, of course, was created for us by Plato, and Western thought is so dominated by Plato that even Professor Greene falls prey to the Master. Says A. E. Taylor in Platonism and Its Influence, Plato’s influence is so pervasive that, “like the pressure of the atmosphere (it) goes undetected because we never really get free from it.”

To return to the Platonic metaphor: In Book II of the Republic, Socrates says, “Do you not know, then, that the beginning in every task is the chief thing...? For it is then that it is best moulded and takes the impression that one wishes to stamp upon it,” (“malista gar de tote platteai kai eudeuta tupos”) “And the stories on the accepted list we will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls (plattein tas psukas)... far rather than their bodies by their hands.”

If Professor Greene errs on this score she does so in good company; in Plato’s and Aristotle’s and more recently in Professor Ashley Montagu’s. “Those who teach the young,” wrote Montagu, “are at once the most important and the most privileged of all those agencies... of society...; for what can exceed in social importance the task of moulding the mind and helping to form the character of the growing member of society?”

Vessels cannot resist, cannot talk back, have no potential, no intellect; with children it is quite otherwise. Teaching is defined by Scheffler as “an activity aimed at the achieving of learning, and practiced in such a manner as to respect the student’s intellectual integrity and capacity for independent judgment.” The metaphor provided by Plato and concurred in by Professor Greene fails the requirements of this acid test.

The “contemporary” question “Who am I?” does not seem to me to be inconsistent with the “ancient” question “What is man?” If ‘I’ is part of the generic “Man” then any discovery about “I” would be an elucidation of some aspect of “Man.” To use the Socratic analogy, “Man” is but the “I” writ large. But to insist that the question “Who am I?” is “modern” is to ignore the entire preoccupation of Socrates whose constant and annoying theme was, “Man know thyself.” Socrates was really inviting his fellow Athenians to come to a full understanding (episteme) of their limitations and thus undertake such tasks as they could reasonably perform. The Protagorean homo-mensura tenet (man is the measure of all things) was also a call for self expression and was, as Gomperz says, “a contribution to the theory of cognition.”
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I am in full agreement with the construction placed on the humanities and particularly with their identification with the liberal arts! I had taken it for granted, however, that historical studies and philosophy were the warp and woof of liberal studies and am a bit surprised that Professor Greene "would also include" these subjects, as if they did not belong there in their own right. Philosophy is not an embellishment to the humanities, nor is it the sort of thing one "does" when one is "moved."

One cannot wipe out the Platonic tradition nor rid oneself of the Platonic ghost in a single sentence. Philosophical questions are philosophical questions, whether they were formulated in the Academy, in the Lyceum, in Vienna, or in Cambridge. I agree with Bernard Bosanquet that

a philosophical treatment is the study of something as a whole and for its own sake. In a certain sense it may be compared to the gaze of a child or of an artist. It deals, that is, with the total and unbroken effect of its object. It desires to ascertain what a thing is, what is its full characteristic and being, its achievement in the general act of the world. History, explanation, analysis into cause and conditions, have value for it only in so far as they contribute to the intelligent estimation of the fullest nature and capabilities of the real individual whole which is under investigation. We all know that a flower is one thing for the geometrical, another for the chemist, another for the botanist, and another, again, for the artist. Now, philosophy can of course make no pretension to cope with any one of the specialists on his own ground. But the general nature of the task imposed upon it is this: aiding itself, so far as possible, by the trained vision of all specialists, to make some attempt to see the full significance of the flower as a word or letter in the great book of the world. And this we call studying it, as it is, and for its own sake, without reservation or presupposition.11

I concur with the view, albeit reluctantly, that "an education in the humanities will (not) guarantee decency or commitment on the part of any individual." Professor Greene's comment on the German schools is apt. For centuries people have gone to the literature of Greece and Rome for an education in values, for a conception of the civilized man, to learn how to live and what to live for, and in what manner to die. Some have, therefore, pointed out that for centuries the best poets (Shakespeare the greatest of them alone excepted); the greatest statesmen (Churchill the greatest among them alone excepted); the most magnanimous men who adorn the pages of history were all educated in the classics. Ergo, the classics have produced great men. But one must also consider the fact that incompetent and corrupt politicians were also educated in the classics. And in our own day Enoch Powell, a bigot and racist par excellence, got a first in the literae humaniores. Ergo, the classics are demonstrably harmful. In either case, the argument misses the point.

Finley states:
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It was not the classics which were providing the values so much as it was the values which were choosing the classics. Too often they still do. One point in Livingstone’s *Defence* was that the classics introduce us to modern problems; they teem with modern character, situations, problems. The reader’s confidence is quickly shaken when he is told on the next page that the difference between our industrial classes and the Greek slave is spiritual rather than material and a few pages further that Aristotle had stated, more than two thousand years ago, the fundamental practical objections to socialist theories and revolutionary schemes.¹²

I very much wish to endorse Professor Greene’s eloquent claim for the humanities “that informed participation in the humanities can make it possible for individuals to recover a true vision of their lives.” But the language is so poetic and mystical that I must seek clarification. Could it be that Socrates’ ghost is imposing on her the doctrine of reincarnation?

Reflection, I agree, involves “anguish,” a bewilderment, a certain puzzling about possibilities; and the humanities, particularly philosophy, can help sort out reasonable choices. But Plato anticipated even Dewey in this view. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates states “Is it not the case where the soul must be at a loss (*psuken apoorein*) as to what significance for it the sensation of hardness has?” Plato is arguing that thought is provoked by contradictions in perceptions. The very notion of unity contradicts the notion of uninterrupted unity. We will recall Dewey’s words in *How We Think*: “We may recapitulate by saying that the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt.”¹⁴

Professor Greene seems to reject the Idealist’s view with its “assumptions of good and right [for it] never solved the problem of whether the ability to know or intuit or ‘see’ the good ensured right action . . .” And yet in the same breath Professor Greene would “impose order on a shapeless, unjust world.” Who must impose, and whose conception of order is to be imposed? Surely, if order and shape are to be imposed there must be a unifying, regulating mind and an idea (*eidos*) of what order and form are. I find her views very consonant with Plato’s.

But there is something even more disquieting to me, and it is the glib manner in which Socrates is dismissed on a point. I assume that Professor Greene has reference to two Socratic paradoxes:

1. All wrong doing is involuntary.
2. One cannot know right and do wrong.

First, we must understand that it was a standing tenet in Greek ethics that one who *knew* “the good” would aim at doing good. Plato puts it thus: “The man who does wrong on purpose, *if there is such a person*, is the good man.” The insinuation is clear: no such man can be found. We must remember the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge and the Socratic dictum given by Plato in the *Laws* that “all wrong doing is involuntary.” Plato’s use of the word *ekousin* (voluntary) means “regularly what we really wish to have.”¹⁵ No one
wishes to have what he knows is bad for him. This does not mean that men do not wish for that which is bad for them, but they do so mistakenly: they mistake the bad for the good. To wish for a thing because you know it is bad for you is clearly absurd. And we all will agree with Aristotle, I am sure, that “everyone wishes for what he thinks is good.”

Thus it seems to me that the proposition “all wrong doing is involuntary” has nothing to do with freedom; it simply states negatively the positive proposition that a man who knows what the highest good is, whether by intellect (nous) or by intuition (diaesthesis), will always act on his knowledge.

ORIGINS OF THE HUMANITIES

Man, says Aristotle, is a political animal. “It is clear that the city state is a natural growth (phaeran oti ton phusei) and that man is by nature a political animal (politikon zoon).” It is clear therefore that the state is also prior by nature to the individual (kai phusei proteron he ekastos).

Since the state is a product of the human mind no one could expect Aristotle to argue that the state existed in point of time prior to the individual. What Aristotle meant is:

1. The state is an evolution which is necessary and sufficient for man’s potential.
2. There is a certain principle underlying the life of the homo sapiens which will not allow the potential to be actualized unless the full sphere or arena which is constituted by the life of the state is constituted in fact.

Such a state resulted from certain social, intellectual and cultural habits and it can be maintained only as these habits are nurtured. It seems to me that the development of this conception of man as a creature capable of education, fallible and mortal, susceptible to civilization, “something intermediate between God and the other animals,” represents a colossal stride for the human kind.

And it was the Greeks who first articulated these human characteristics (anthropinos), who first conceived of the good life in terms of an educational ideal. The political state and the study of humanities are linked in Greek history.

The historical development has been well sketched for us in Professor Greene’s paper. But let me, for my own purpose, spell them out more precisely. As early as the time of Solon (born circa 639 B.C.) there was a distinction between gymnastike, the training of the body, and mousike, the training of the soul. Out of the mousike there evolved the body of studies which was later known as the liberal arts. By the time of Aristotle the Greek conception of education had reached its acme and his words may be taken as a true representation of the Greek ideal of man and of education.

In the Politics he defines the liberal arts (eleutherion epistemon) as the proper study of free men who seek moral and intellectual excellence in general rather than that which is immediately useful. Thus we have the beginning of the...
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distinction between liberal (eleutheron) and technical (aneleutheron) education, the foreshadowing of the identification of the liberal arts with general culture, and the invidious contrasting of general and specialized education. It should be pointed out that the word (eleutheron) is derived from the verb (eleutheroo) = to be set free, to release, to free from blame, to acquit.

While it is true that no specific number of subjects are found among the Greek writers on education, it is very certain that grammar was first on the list, followed by rhetoric and dialectics (logic). Arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy came later. Still later medicine and architecture were listed as liberal subjects and of course philosophy became for Plato the coping stone of the curriculum.

These subjects were passed on to the Romans after Rome conquered Greece with her arms and as Horace complained, “Greece took her Roman conqueror captive and introduced art into the rustic Latium,” Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit, et arces. At any rate the staples of the education of the Roman gentleman (liber homo), by whatever name they were called—artes liberales, studium liberalia, liberales disciplares, or liberales scientiae—were fixed.

By the time of Seneca and Quintilian, that is, by the end of the first century of the Christian era, the liberal arts had become a clearly distinguishable body of instruction, known as (encyclios paideia), a rounded or encyclical education.

The promulgation of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire ushered in a new era for the humanities. The Western church early exhibited strong antagonism against the pagan learning; then there was a period of guarded toleration, and finally an embrace by the church of the liberal arts. The conflicts between the simple spirit of Christianity and the arrogance of pagan learning is poignantly portrayed in the writings of St. Augustine and St. Jerome. St. Augustine advocated “spoiling the Egyptian,” by which he meant using the powerful intellectual resources of the arts to the advantage of the Gospel. The marriage between the arts and the Church was consummated by Martianus Capella’s De Nuptius Philologiae et Murcurii.

Even though the universities of Western Europe “arose” outside the authority of the church, they soon fell under the church’s influence, thus ensuring the standardization of the curriculum. Oxford was an offshoot of Paris, as Cambridge was of Oxford, and as Harvard was of Cambridge. Thus by a series of successions the curriculum of the American university can be linked to humanistic learning as developed by the Greeks and modified through the centuries.

What has all of this to do with the relationship between the humanities and the education of elementary school teachers? The education of elementary school teachers had a very inauspicious beginning in Western Europe, as in America, and has never really acquired a locus standi in the university. All of us here are too familiar with that story, hence I need not recount it.

Within the last twenty years, beginning with Bestor’s Educational Wasteland, (1953) a very considerable literature, mostly critical, has appeared on the subject of teacher education. Most of these writers have been aliens to the field of “professional education,” and many have examined the relationship between the liberal arts and the education of teachers.
That this kind of trenchant examination of the education of teachers has not been carried out by the professional educators is perhaps symptomatic of the state of the intellectual calibre, or lack of it, of professional educators. Arrowsmith states, and I agree with him, "Teachers have far too long been recruited from the ranks of the not-too-bright, and then stultified by their education," at the hands of the not-too-bright professors of education. There is some evidence to support this view that teachers generally are below average liberal arts graduates in intelligence. Some time ago a group of liberal arts graduates at Cornell, not one of whom was exposed to a professional education course, took the National Teacher Examination. Their average score was higher than the average score of graduates of teacher colleges. Of course, it might also support the view that students "pick up" a great deal about education during their college life and "professional education" might be a big joke!

The relationship between the liberal arts and teacher education was subjected to detailed investigation at the "Year of the Liberal Arts" conference held in Phoenix, Arizona, during the spring of 1970. The results of the conference were published in a book, ominously titled, The Liberal Arts and Teacher Education, a Confrontation. Anyone who is interested in the education of teachers should read the book. Three of these essays are, I think, of particular significance to our concerns: Timothy Healy's "The Liberal Arts, Open Admissions and the Training of Teachers"; B. Othanel Smith's, "The Liberal Arts and Teacher Education"; and William Arrowsmith's, "The Future of Teaching."

Professor Smith summarizes his views thus:

Unless there is a program of teacher preparation in the liberal arts appropriate to the work in humanities in the schools, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to find appropriate personnel to man the public school program. This will require, among other things, that in the universities and colleges we abandon the policy of "liberal arts as usual." Instead it will be necessary to develop a program for the preparation of teachers in the liberal arts through the cooperation of the same mix of personnel as recommended for the development of the public school program. In any event, a program in liberal arts must come to grips with man's problems and experiences, his purpose and his hopes, his conditions and his destiny, in and through a content representative of the intellectual tradition and also of the various media of communication. It must also provide for an intellectual discipline that is not purely literary and subjective.

It is well to bear in mind that the liberal arts are neither a place, a college department, nor even a college. They are a depository of a certain kind of knowledge, and any program of education that has need of such knowledge can and should appropriate it. This does not mean that liberal arts education should be the business of everyone. If it is to be well done, it must be carried on by a group of devoted scholars. But neither does it mean that such a body has a monopoly on the territory of the liberal arts.
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Professor Arrowsmith is in substantial agreement with Smith: A liberal education

... liberates because it sets us free to become ourselves, to realize ourselves; it frees us to learn, slowly and painfully perhaps, our limitations and our powers, and to recognize our real modalities, undeafened by the overwhelming Muzak of the social and political enterprise. Liberally educated, we are free to become political at last, without risk of being captured and possessed by our politics. And this freedom, this ripeness of self, is the indispensable element in all true teaching, simply because it speaks so compellingly to those who hunger to be free—that is, presumably, to all men.23

Men are educable in direct proportion to their conviction of being imperfect, unfinished, base, unrealized; gods need neither education nor degrees. The teacher educates by being the man he is, by the power and beauty of his knowledge, as that knowledge is expressed in his conduct or being or understanding. He has no other authority. And the intrusion of any extraneous authority is a profanation of education. Men want education because they want to perfect their humanity. The creation of a joint humanity, the collaboration of teacher and student in the making of a self, is the aim of the enterprise.24

This is strikingly reminiscent of the Socratic dialectic which required that one be contradicted and made to feel uncomfortable before “delivering” a good idea. Says Socrates, no one can truly be said to be educated until he is contradicted, even though he be the King of Persia.

Formal education, I am convinced, cannot improve, cannot set us free, until we recognize—and act on our recognition—that the liberal arts and teacher education are one and the same thing. Only when the liberal arts colleges renounce their servile professionalism and devote themselves seriously—that is, with all their resources—to the education of teachers, will public education ever become the instrument of a great human and democratic culture.25

Timothy Healy sees one of two possibilities for the future of teacher education:

1. A return to the teacher education college, with a revival of the normal school.

2. A scrapping of teacher education as we now know it and a fresh beginning.26

His view was that the latter would prevail.

Near the end of the essay Healy made this almost prophetic remark: “It might remain a possibility, at least in a speculative world, that the principle thrust of
our teacher-training institutions ought not to be to train new teachers but to retrain old ones. The schools could conceivably do a much better job of handling the novices.\textsuperscript{27}

I sense a crisis in the area of teacher education, certainly here at Brockport. There has been a failure somewhere along the way. It could be that the liberal arts faculty by assuming a superior stance, or by its preoccupation with what Arrowsmith calls “useless research and pseudo-scholarship” is driving teacher education from the center of intellectual activity. What seems to be the fad is the emerging, recreated Normal School, euphemistically called “competency based certification.”

Conant urged ten years ago that the liberal arts faculty assume responsibility for the education of teachers; but the colleges and universities absconded and by default there has arisen this recent anti-intellectual, anti-humanistic, ill-directed movement which threatens to replace the process of education with an illiberal, performance based system. With a plethora of pedagogic verbiage, and a paucity of sound philosophic humanistic thinking, this new fad moves forward, apparently unchecked. And those who demand from the exponents some sort of rationale are dubbed “humbugs.” They want to “get on” with the job!

But those of us who have a sense of history can only be comforted by the fact that experience has shown that a purely, mechanically based operation, devoid of theory and a philosophical base, soon manifests its own inadequacies and degenerates into perfunctory and repetitious acts.

It is the duty of those of us who are aware of this danger to call the signals.
FOOTNOTES

3 A. J. Ayer, op. cit., p. 49.
7 Ibid.
13 Plato, Republic, tr. Paul Shorey, Book VII, 524, E.
17 Bernard Bosanquet, op. cit., p. 6.
18 George Simmons, Education and Western Civilization (Arlington: College Readings, Inc., 1972), Chapter 15, Passim.
22 Ibid., p. 119.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Timothy Healy, "The Liberal Arts, Open Admissions and The Training of Teachers," Ibid., p. 29.
27 Ibid., pp. 34, 35.

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