

RESPONSE TO MAXINE GREENE

Jeffery Martin Silberman

I would note that I discern no problem, at least, from my vantage, I perceive no inherent conflict between the two parties of this discussion. I would argue that the state and education are committed to the same goals and as such have a confluence of ideals and purposes. Thus, what is good for one is also good for the other. Hence, at least in theory, no debate exists in so far as the state and education seek common ends. This is not to diminish the very real concerns which Prof. Greene pointed out in her remarks, for example, about the National Commission on Excellence. We see in this instance a distortion of public trust and a partisan political statement. I do not perceive this as typical nor as a case of moral surrender by the state.

It would be in my understanding of the state that I differ somewhat from Professor Greene. There can be little question that distinctions need to be made between federal and individual state governments, as well as between the influence of school boards over against city government regarding education. Politics, economics, and bureaucracy do all contribute to the end product - that is, the form and content of the educational system. Yet I am unwilling to place the blame for all of the problems of education at the door of anyone of these. For, despite the politicians, fiscal priorities, and entrenched civil servants, each citizen shares the responsibility for both the successes and failures of an educational process. Ultimately, I would suggest that parents mediate the nature of their childrens' educational future by participating or not in the democratic process.

Both the state and educational systems are human institutions. They are established by people to serve the needs of people. The state is a structure formed to keep order and to ensure the principles designated by the participants of that community. Our democratic system includes the opportunity for universal suffrage and thus universal participation. When that process yields decisions that are counter to our own, we may work from within to change them. If the principles of that system diverge from our philosophy, we may offer alternatives for public consideration. I do not perceive an opposing view to my own as necessarily either morally indifferent or morally corrupt. I do not presume that bureaucrats and technicians function without their own principles, even if those principles differ or even disregard mine. By virtue of my commitment to a liberal Humanist philosophy, I feel obligated to speak out against such attitudes and to work for their revision. But that is as far as I can go.

Like the state, educational systems serve as primary contributors to a process that provides the knowledge and skills to permit functional participation in society and life in general. Mortimer J. Adler in the *Paideia Proposal* identified three essentials for basic schooling in our culture. "Basic schooling should prepare (children) to take advantage of every opportunity for personal development that our society offers. "It should provide".. .an adequate preparation for discharging the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. "And, third, it should" prepare them for [earning a living].. .not

by training them for one or another particular job in our industrial economy, but by giving them the basic skills that are common to all work in a society such as ours." Unless one holds knowledge or wisdom as goals in and of themselves, there can be no other function for the educational system except to equip members of society with the tools of active contribution to and decision-making about the continuance of the state. The state, for its part, must foster and support those institutions which allow it to grow (and its citizenry to grow) and which allow it to maintain its mandate. Since an educated citizenry aids that process, the state cannot but endorse universal public education.

With the preceding I have made my case for public education. The next step is to consider whether the state can or should require all its people to participate in this system of universal education. The simplest way of establishing this point is to look at the situation created when it is eliminated or rejected. For example, when minority youth in urban settings have dropped out of the educational system, numerous problems occur. The results are often increased burdens upon our social welfare or criminal justice systems. Failure in one venue creates burdens in another. These situations benefit no one, not the victims of historical inequity or prejudice, not the average citizen, and certainly not the state. In my view, the state has as a self-protective and self-preserving measure the right to insure basic functional skills of all its members. Of course, the system must also be held accountable when there is a failure such that all are not given equal access and opportunity within the context of our society.

Education is therefore a necessary human institution supported by the state for its own survival and continuation. But we must now ask about the appropriate form and content of that institution. Historically, educational systems were designed to train the average students in generally accepted basic skills. We all recall the three R's - Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. It was assumed that these provided adequate knowledge for daily living within Society. Although this knowledge did not necessarily lead to advanced employment and economic opportunities. Notwithstanding the fact that the perspectives of women, minorities, and others have been absent from the system, it did function for some of us. Today, however, a more realistic look at various social strata within our society points out the need for more changes. We are all too aware, for example, of the connection between education and economic fortunes. We now know that cultural background influences standardized test scores. We see that women still have yet to achieve total equality in our society. Perhaps these are peripheral issues, yet they illustrate increasing consciousness in the public debate about social values which affect education.

Most people recognize that there are students who have disabilities or disadvantages for which the standard educational system is inappropriate. These students require special programs or facilities in order to compete equally with their peers. Fortunately in recent years our society has acknowledged its responsibility in this regard. Programs for physically and economically disadvantaged students have increased during the last twenty years.

Humanism Today

The central assumption is that the state has a moral obligation to provide equal educational opportunity to all citizens. As Professor Greene notes, it was a civil rights movement inspired by a dream that enabled people to believe in the process and bring about change. It was a change that transcended educational institutions. A change that affected people on many levels in their own lives and in our society. If we are to be engaged in the current situation in education, we must assert publicly both our practical and moral argument. We are our own most powerful ally.

Another dimension of public responsibility in education is to help each person develop to the fullest of his or her capacities. More specifically, I am thinking of those people with exceptional abilities or skills; not only intellectual, but artistic or musical abilities as well. This may be a more controversial view of the state's role in education, for it goes beyond the requirements of providing basic skills to all people. Some rightfully ask whether the state should support special programs for advanced or superior students. And if so, how can we do this without creating a kind of intellectual elite? Can we subject them to the inevitable boredom of ordinary schooling? Are we not then in jeopardy of losing the contributions they might make given free reign to develop?

Mortimer Adler responds to this issue when challenged on his position that education must be the same for all. He holds that education must be of the same quality for all children to the extent that children have the same human qualities, the same human tendencies, the same future, the same inherent capacities. Thus, they deserve the same education. With regard to differences, he replies, "The answer lies in adjusting that program to individual differences by administering it sensitively and flexibly in ways that accord with whatever differences must be taken into account." In short, programs which respond to the individual student are a good and a responsibility of an enlightened democratic educational system. As participants in the democratic process, each of us has the opportunity and, more, the responsibility to help accomplish that goal. Obviously, the issues of teachers and their training, appropriate funding, and similar relevant concerns arise here. It would however go well beyond my allotted time to address them.