

THE HUMANISM OF HERBERT READ¹

Charles G. Wieder

Appalachian State University

As readers of the Social Theory Caucus Bulletin, you are probably, by and large, more familiar with Herbert Read's views on art education than others in our field. One would expect that you are also generally more sympathetic with his theoretical orientation as well as more aware of the relevance of his work to current educational concerns. This essay will focus on the historical basis of Read's moral ideas, and their implications for the work that lies ahead for this group of socially concerned art educators.

To all those who have followed the establishment of the Social Theory Caucus, it is safe to say that the group is founded upon humanist values. As the title of this essay implies, Read's work is thought to represent a distinct form of humanism. It is this alternative conception of humanism that I will endeavor to establish in the hope of indicating its pertinence to current social issues bearing upon art education. In so doing I hope to support the contention that the commonly held view of what it is to be a liberal humanist is tragically flawed.

Far more radical than Lowenfeld, his contemporary, Read was an uncompromising individualist and romantic. Yet, for all his romanticism, he was nonetheless rational; and for all his individualism he was no less compassionate. Since to some this composite of traits may seem paradoxical, explanation is in order. In referring to Read as a romantic I do not mean merely that he subscribed to philosophical idealism, but more essentially that he held the deepest confidence in the human potential for

competent, meaningful, and ethical existence, as well as a firm belief in human volition and self-determination. And by the term individualist, reference is to Read's appreciation of personal and cultural diversity coupled with a commitment to self-ownership and self-expression.

What of this view of humanism being attributed to Read? Is it one that is commonly held, even among self-proclaimed humanists? I dare say that most of those associating themselves with the Social Theory Caucus would not describe their ideological affiliations in quite this way. Probably, most would prefer to describe themselves as more or less liberal-minded politically and philosophically. Hence, some readers may now rightfully be asking if individualism is at the core of true humanism. Could it be that Sir Herbert was mistaken? Am I?

This very question of the relationship of humanism and individualism was recently raised quite succinctly by the British humanist philosopher Anthony Flew in a review of Henri Lapage's Tomorrow, Capitalism. (Free Inquiry, Sp., 1983) "Most American humanists," Flew writes "(are) liberal, just as most British humanists are...socialist(s)." The idea of an individualist-humanist, also committed to capitalism, was to him unheard of at the very least. As a result of his reading of Lapage, though, Flew's humanism had come to be refined, and by his own admission he was let to reconsider what it is that humanism stands for. Likewise, I will be urging you to challenge conventional orthodoxy and ask if today's brand of socialist-liberalism is the best or the only form that humanism should take.

Despite the appearance of Humanist Manifesto I in 1933, Humanist Manifest II in 1973, and A Secular Humanist Declaration in 1980 (Kurtz), answers to the questions posed above are far from decided. In fact, the

Kurtz statement, though endorsed by fifty-eight "leaders of (humanist) thought," has come under more heavy fire from proponents than detractors. At the last count, there were those individuals brazen enough to admit to being secular humanists, as well as those calling themselves rational humanists, in addition to ethical humanists, social democrats, and free-thinkers, among other brands proclaiming their allegiances to more or less the same cause (Lamont, 1977, pp. 19-29). Even within the ranks of these various and often diverse factions there appears to be more than occasional dissonance. Yet, odd as it may sound to the uninitiated, there is surprising acceptance of this divisive state of affairs, an understanding that comes from the recognition of the value that humanism places on independence of thought, critical judgment, open discussion, and diversity of opinion. Still, even with this agreement to disagree and to work toward mutual goals amidst the disarray, let me hasten to add that there appears to be far more than necessary amounts of counterproductive consternation within the ranks. One's broadmindedness--as well as one's commitment--is indeed tested by keeping company with both B. F. Skinner and Abraham Maslow: the id and the ego seem more compatible bedfellows than the notions of behaviorism and self-actualization.

To keep from suffering utter despair, a historical perspective is advised. Studying the course of civilization one finds that humanism, as an idea of a way of life, offered not only a novel conception of mankind but also one which is still very much in the process of defining itself.² To further complicate matters, schools of thought commonly associated with the humanist social-political frame of mind, such as liberalism, have come to represent such diverse outlooks that these terms have lost much of

their power to define let alone to call to action.

In all of this--the novelty of the idea of humanism combined with the inner uncertainty of its meaning--it is not at all difficult to lose sight of the shared concerns and insights that gave rise to humanist philosophy and are its lifeblood. As a consequence, it has been difficult to keep in sharp focus the tradition of humanism embraced by Read. Tragically, this conception is fading from sight not because it has grown obsolete, but rather due more to the truly radical departure of this view of mankind from mainstream ideology. Having barely surfaced in a handful of preindustrial civilizations, this revolutionary, if formative, conception of human morality tilts headlong against established belief and institutional authority. Though there have been historical forerunners of humanism, the theory has never been systematically and comprehensively formulated. And, for reasons that have been indicated, the fact that this far from simple notion has little historical precedence explains its lack of popular appeal. Hence, it becomes all the more important that the time to carefully and patiently explain what it is that we are about. If not ushering forth a philosophical renaissance, this effort is necessary to stem the tides of tradition which tend to dull the edges of ideas that do not blend well into the uniformly familiar landscape of certified slogans and unoffensive nonsense.

Just what were the intellectual forebears of the brand of classical liberalism that Read stood for? Historically--and this is recent history--classical liberalism was grounded on the following currents of post-renaissance enlightenment thought: a) freethought--the ideal of human independence, independent judgment, and free-will (which view had come to be associated

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with romanticism and later with irrational emotivism); b) philosophic and scientific rationalism--belief in the efficacy of reason and the corresponding opposition to religious supernaturalism; c) individualism--the view that individuals are the makers of their own characters, that, barring coercion, nobody owns other persons or rightfully forms their beliefs without their compliance (not the state, nor gods, nor even dissertation committees); and d) the idea of a free, open society respecting voluntary associations between individuals, a spontaneous social order spawned from natural law (which was the original meaning of anarchism).

Standing firmly against this bold, new, defiant, affirmative conception of human nature were--and are--intolerance, entrenched dogmatism, and political tyranny. And yet, far more lethal for the emergence of classical liberalism were its self-inflicted, internal wounds: a) rationality, subverted by narrowminded scientism, took the form of positivism, and later still narrower forms of linguistic philosophy, which shied away from all but the most esoteric matters;³ b) scientific problems and methods accordingly became more narrowly confined and reductionistic (e.g., behaviorism) and their application less and less relevant to human conditions; c) romanticism's association with quixotic impracticality undermined its appeal as a virtue; and d) the association of individualism with lack of compassion for one's brethren likewise tended to discredit its moral worth.

The consequence of this internal sabotage was a shift in the meaning of humanism toward today's liberal-collectivism, as noted earlier in the Flew quotation. To revive the humanist sense of purpose that so moved Herbert Read I recommend to you a careful rereading of Read and those thinkers upon whose shoulders he so proudly stood.

FOOTNOTES

1. This essay is based on a presentation to the Social Theory Caucus at the 1983 Detroit conference of the National Art Education Association, which was an extension of an earlier research presentation entitled "Herbert Read on Education, Art, and Individual Liberty" (scheduled for publication in The Journal of Aesthetic Education).

For an exposition of Herbert Read's ideas on art and education, in addition to consulting his Education Through Art (N.Y.:Pantheon, 1958), the October 1969 issue of The Journal of Aesthetic Education (R. Smith, ed.) features three articles on Read by J. Keel, M. Parsons, and R. Wasson.

2. For a relatively comprehensive, albeit tentative, exposition of humanism, see C. Lamont's The Philosophy of Humanism (5th ed.), N.Y.:Unger, 1977. An indication of the applications of humanist philosophy to educational psychology is A. Maslow's Toward a Psychology of Being (2nd ed.), N.Y.:Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1968, especially the discussion of "self-actualization," pp. 189-214.
3. For an excellent analysis of this trend in the social sciences toward scientism modeled after the reductionistic methods of the physical sciences, see M. Rothbard's Individualism and the Philosophy of the Social Sciences (Calif.:Cato Inst., 1979), I. Child's Humanistic Psychology and the Research Tradition (N.Y.:Wiley & Sons, 1973), C. G. Wieder's "Alternative Approaches to Problems in Art Education" (Studies in Art Education, 17:1, 1975), and F. A. Hayek's The Counterrevolution of Science (Calif.:Cato Inst., 1979).

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