

A Sketch of a Humane Education: A Capability Approach Perspective

Kevin Ross Nera

Abstract: Poverty, understood as basic capability deprivation, can only be solved through a process of expanding the freedoms that people value and have reason to value. This process can only begin if the capability to imagine and aspire for an alternative lifestyle worthy of human dignity is cultivated by an education program that develops both the capability to reason and to value. These two facets play a major role in the creative exercise of human agency. This program of humane education can only come from an adequate description of the human agent as a persona that seeks to actualize itself based on his/her understanding of the good. Education must therefore seek to cultivate the capability to have an adequate conception of the good (normative) as well as the capability to constantly re-evaluate one's conception of the good (evaluative) in order to freely and reasonably choose a life that one values and has reason to value. Education must therefore entail not merely the development of skills nor specialization in a particular field but must concentrate on the integration of the human person as a whole which leads to self-creative praxis.

Keywords: capability, philosophy of development, education, actualization, reason, value, Amartya Sen

Introduction

If poverty is seen essentially as deprivation of basic capabilities or the capability to lead lives one values and has reason to value (Sen 1999, 87), then development ought to be seen as the process of liberation from such capability deprivation. However, material liberation requires another sort of liberation, that of the imagination. As such, one of the capabilities that deserves special attention is the capability to imagine and aspire for a lifestyle that is worthy of human dignity. Without this capability, the process of development cannot even begin to start because people would just be stuck in their current state of poverty and misery without any way of freedom. This capability therefore plays a fundamental role in the possibility of development for even happening. Thus, development efforts must pay sufficient attention on the cultivation of this capability to imagine and aspire for an alternative lifestyle worthy of human dignity. This cultivation can only take place through a process of humane education that enables people to fully exercise their individual freedom as a

Kevin Ross Nera

social commitment (Sen 1999, xii). In order for a program of humane education to be instituted, it is first necessary to provide for a description of the human agent and his/her relevant capabilities. It is only when such a process of transformative education which addresses these capabilities more fully and cultivates the individual's reasoned agency has taken place that Sen's perspective of *Development as Freedom* can be fully productive. Only when transformative education has taken place the individual would be more conducive towards the improvement not only of his/her own life but also of the society to which he/she belongs. The improvement of society through the expansion of the substantive freedoms that people enjoy can only take place through the cultivation of these central capabilities.

Foundations of a Humane Education

In order to understand our proposal for a humane education, we must first begin with an understanding of the human being as an agent. This understanding of the human being as an agent is in turn grounded on an understanding of the human being as a *persona*.

Human as Persona

Instead of seeing the human person as merely a rational animal, I would like to proceed with an understanding of the human person as a *persona*. The human agent as a *persona* is a being which seeks to actualize himself/herself in freedom according to his/her most creative potentials (Rodriguez 2008, 60). The *persona* is never in a state of stasis but is in a process of continual becoming. It does not have a fixed essence or a strict definition of what being human means that it merely actualizes, but rather has its actualization as a process of continual unfolding according to one's limited but nevertheless creative potentials. It is precisely the actualization of the utmost possibilities that inheres in every individual that is the essence of being human rather than a fixed essence that is defined *a priori*. This view of the human being as a *persona* respects the destined, given aspects of life such as his/her family, race, gender, sexuality, embodiment as well as the concrete aspects of the human person such as the actual circumstances and situations that he/she faces from birth until death. As such, this view sees the human agent as being in a perpetual state of dynamic self-actualization in which his/her very life and meaning is at stake.

Furthermore, the *persona* is not seen just for what he/she currently is but also for the utmost potentials that reside within his/her being. Thus, its focus is not merely with actuality but with the creative potentials that have yet to be unlocked and which is possible to actualize within the agent. This process of self-actualization is not mere behaviourism or blind response to external stimuli but is a matter of freedom. Rather, such exercise of freedom always takes place through concrete action which is the site of self-actualization. The exercise of

this freedom through concrete action that may be either constructive or destructive to the self is made possible only because the persona as such is the unifying center of these intentional actions. Here, intentional is to be understood as having a double meaning in the sense of having their actions always directed to certain concrete objects or situations. And second, such actions are always intentional in so far as they tend to the fulfilment of one's personal life projects. One's life is oriented towards the fulfilment of the personal projects that one has chosen which are none other than the concrete manifestations of the deeply held conception of the good that one has. These life projects ground the actions that one undertakes and is the fount of meaning for one's life and actions. Meaning is found on the basis of these life projects that define what one's life is and is going to become.

Actualization within Society

While the persona actualizes himself/herself through concrete action, the space of concrete action in which free choice unfolds is always within a social context. This social context is the society in which the persona belongs. Society therefore plays a big role in the actualization process of any individual persona. Hence, the agent's quest for self-actualization is always intertwined with the societal conditions that may be enabling or disabling for one's self-actualization. A person may find it difficult to concretize one's life projects because of the prevailing societal conditions and this is precisely what poverty as capability deprivation is all about. It is about denying the people the opportunity to be what they can be due to the lack of fair and equitable processes and opportunities that would otherwise have allowed them to concretize their life plans. Poverty is seen as a negative or disruptive phenomenon that prevents individuals from actualizing themselves. As such, it must be overcome through the process of liberation that would entail allowing people to exercise their reasoned agency in a more constructive manner. Without such development, the freedom of people to actualize themselves is stifled by the persistence of these unjust social conditions which are the by-product of the individual choices that we make. Thus, development must seek toward the transformation of the individual in order for him to act in such a way that will make society a more conducive place for self-actualization. This, as Amartya Sen proposes, can be done through expanding the freedoms of people to lead the lives they value and have reason to value.

Freedom, Reason and Value

From Sen's definition of development, three important facets of the human person come to light – freedom, reason, and value. These three are highly interrelated and can be mutually constructive of one another. For our purposes, we shall like to investigate the relationship between these three important facets

of the *persona*. In particular, we would approach it through the understanding of freedom as being essentially mediated by reason and value. There is no such thing as freedom that is not mediated by these two facets because these two facets are the source of the intentionality behind one's actions. Free choice is geared towards the fulfilment of a particular purpose and not merely the blind response to external stimuli. In other words, this simply means that the meaning behind our free choices is grounded on the reasons behind our actions. These reasons are in turn a response to the values that we hold dear in determining the choices that we make. The meaningful exercise of human freedom is thus grounded on reason and value.

In order to proceed, we must now examine what these two facets actually contain in order that our view of the human agent as a free and self-actualizing persona will be complete. Such a description of the persona would in turn determine the prescription – in particular, the type of education that must be instituted – that I would like to propose.

Reason and Rationality

First of all, it is important to define reason by saying what it is not. Contrary to the prevailing understanding of rationality especially that provided by mainstream economics wherein a rational person is one that is benefit maximizing and cost minimizing, our understanding of rationality proceeds through a much broader perspective. This broader perspective on rationality hopes to be more faithful to human life as it is actually experienced and not just the mere abstraction of theory – economic or otherwise.

The problem with this limited perspective of rationality, as I would argue, is that it operates on a pre-determined and limited conception of what the good is. It presupposes a certain valuation system (that of utility) and takes this valuation system as the ultimate and pre-dominant valuation system that people have. This value system sees the human person as essentially a self-satisfying creature for whom other matters such as the affairs of others are only secondary. This is problematic since people don't always operate under the presumption of selfishness and in fact they make decisions out of compassion and care for others. Furthermore, such a limited point of view makes paragons of virtue such as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela as nothing more than great fools and ordinary people as being less foolish (Sen 2006, 21). This is clearly not the case as there are much more motivations at play within the human psyche aside from self-interested behaviour.

As an alternative to this view of rationality, I propose a different conceptualization of rationality that has two important facets – horizontal reasoning and vertical reasoning. The first, horizontal reasoning, has to do with decision-making wherein the choices available to one are different in type but are of the similar value. Decisions such as what to eat during dinner assuming that the choices do not starkly differ in prices or matters of preference such as

color and style fall under this category. The second, vertical reasoning, plays a more important role in ethical matters and the matters which have real value as this is the type of reasoning that is employed when faced with options that are of different degrees. The decision to eat at a luxury restaurant using the people's money when one could use the money for the right purposes is one instance of the use of this vertical or ethical decision making. It forces one to choose between social justice on the one hand, and luxury dining on the other. The capability to figure out whether one is faced with a situation that requires horizontal or vertical decision making is itself constitutive of this capability. Such a capability has mainly to do with being able to recognize the different values that are attached to the choices made available by one's particular circumstances and the capability to form a hierarchy among these values. Such reasoning is not therefore mere intellection but is a form of intuition of a hierarchy of values. This hierarchy is not one that is set in stone from the outset but rather serves as an ethical compass that affects our decision-making process. This capability affects our decision-making but does not determine it *a priori*. Rather, this capability works in dynamic interaction with the concrete circumstances one is embedded in as well as the personal life projects that one has. Thus, such reasoning is always in play in the acting out of intentional actions as was discussed earlier.

Vertical Reasoning and Value

In order to understand the important relationship between vertical reasoning which is the capability to form a schema of values which guide our ethical decision making processes and values, it is first important to begin with a preliminary understanding of what values are, or more precisely, what they are able to make the human agent do.

Values, following a Schelerian framework, refer to that which has the intrinsic capability to pull people to respond through an action of valuing (Rodriguez 2008, 2). Values are therefore a call which requires of the individual agent a response that seeks to actualize the value that is an inherent possibility in the thing that carries the value. Values are therefore a call to action on the part of the individual who is able to perceive these values through a form of intuition. This intuition is an intuition of the hierarchy of values for values are always arranged according to a particular schema where some values are held to be of higher importance than other values. Furthermore, multiple values may be carried by a concrete object or a particular situation and it is part of the individual's capability for vertical reasoning to figure out what the relevant values are in a particular situation and to see which of them ought to take precedence in one's free choice for actualization.

On the part of the individual, there exists certain predispositions for perceiving the good manifested in the particular predispositions towards certain order of values. These predispositions form a schema which guides our ability to perceive and respond to value (value-ception) which we actualize in the choices

Kevin Ross Nera

that we make given the particular situations and options made available to us. This schema serves as a rough and ready guide for our decision-making processes and forms the basis of the rationality behind our actions.

Values and Historicity

While we are able to intuit values in concrete objects and situations, this does not mean that values are not mediated by historical circumstance. In fact, the ways in which we value (i.e., our value systems) are a product of our own particular historicity. This does not mean, however, that our historicity fully determines our values for we are free to interact precisely with other horizons that contain different valuational schemas and to decide for ourselves which among the multiple value schemas available to us we will subscribe to. This capability for choice and integration enables us to have a more sensitive and practical valuational schema than what is immediately given to us by our historicity. Nonetheless, our historicity plays a crucial role in the formation of our value systems for the possibility of having an expanded value system still begins from the horizon of our own perspectival value system.

The main contribution of our historicity towards the formation of our value systems is through the *ethos* of our period which is the valuational system that guides the inner lives of a certain period and society and which effectively shapes our individual value systems (Rodriguez 2008, 63). This *ethos* is a partial capture of the order of the *cosmos* and is the utmost attempt of any society to encapsulate the hierarchy of the good within a particular set of beliefs or traditions or valuational schemas according to their limited capability (Rodriguez 2008, 61). As such, our *ethos* may be truthfully embedded in the hierarchy of values that governs the universe as such or it may be a destructive value system wherein the hierarchy of values that it proposes is an inversion of the natural order of the universe. Turning to our concrete experience of the excesses of capitalism, we can see that the prevailing *ethos* of our time which focuses on unconstrained wealth accumulation and cut-throat competition for the goods of this world is a clear inversion of a hierarchy of values that would enable people to truly flourish and exercise their freedom in a meaningful manner. Such a distorted *ethos* shapes the very way in which we as individuals live and shape our lives and thus, there is a danger of falling into the trap of ascribing to valuational schemas that are potentially destructive of our own well-being without even being aware of it. Reflection and interaction with other valuational systems is therefore important to make us aware of the limitations of our value systems and hopefully enable us to transform these valuational schemas such that they will become more conducive to our individual and our society's flourishing.

It is important to note, however, that the *ethos* of our time which shapes our own value systems is not itself unmediated. In fact, it is the result of the constant interactions of the different identities and affiliations that we first grow

up with and second, hopefully choose for ourselves. Our valuational systems are either a reflection of or a reaction against the prevalent *ethos*. They are the product of the interweaving of our plural identities and affiliations and the exercise of our reasoned capability to choose which among these relevant identities and affiliations hold more weight in our lives. Our rationality, which includes our value systems, is heavily influenced by our understanding of who we are and the baggage of the traditions and systems that are related with our identity. It is with this view of the *ethos* as a primary (trans-)formative influence on our own value systems that our historicity plays a major role in the formation of the way we perceive and understand the good.

As a final caveat, the particular value system embedded in one's rationality is not a fixed understanding of the good and an *a priori* hierarchy of such values but is an evolving schema through which one make decisions about life. The continuous transformation of this schema is dependent upon the different values one attaches to one's identities and the affiliations that one choose to have. Such affiliations demand a certain way of viewing the world as is the case with gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and political beliefs among others. Thus, our valuational schemas are not fixed schemas but are rather open to the dynamism of life and free choice.

As a brief summary, the persona's freedom, mediated by reason and value, constitutes his rationality. This rationality is in itself a process of constant becoming that is continuously shaped by the different choices one makes. It is the conceptual and valuational schema that helps one choose which among the plurality of choices and identities that one has one will attach greater significance to. This attachment of significance in turn compels one to action – whether affirmative or negative – to the perceived value of such choices.

A Sketch of a Humane Education

Now that we have undergone a description of what a persona as a free agent really is, we may turn our attention toward a prescription that would enable the persona as a free agent to transform his/her life as well as the society in which he/she lives such that he or she would have the substantive freedom to live the life that upon further reflection he/she has reason to value. The prescription I put forward is a form of education that allows individuals to lead humane lives. The question we must now address is this – what does a humane education consist of?

If the person is a free agent that acts in accordance with his/her rationality and this rationality is always a partial capture of the hierarchy of values that is inherent in the universe, then the expansion of the freedom of the person must necessarily entail the expansion of the capability to reason out for and respond to one's conception of the good. The expansion of the freedom to lead the life one values and has reason to value only makes sense if the capability to reason and value are enriched by education so that they do not remain blind to the life that

Kevin Ross Nera

holds an inherent dignity and calls for a minimum level of social justice which creates the space for creative flourishing. Without such cultivation, the possibility of development is nigh since people would settle for lives that are plagued with destitution or with destructive conceptions of the good life such as extreme materialism and blind adherence to dogmatic beliefs. Such a humane education must therefore consist in the cultivation of reason and value which allows people for creative and rational exercise of their agency in order to aspire to a sufficiently just state of life and to achieve the means for accomplishing these aspiration. Hence, a program of a humane education must not deal with the mere cultivation of technical and intellectual expertise but must rather entail the integration of the person as one who is able to evaluate and re-evaluate the choices which are open to his freedom.

This is in line with what Krishnamurti (1996, 89) says of education,

If we are being educated merely to achieve distinction, to get a better job, to be more efficient, to have wider domination over others, then our lives will be shallow and empty. If we are being educated only to be scientists, to be scholars wedded to books, or specialists addicted to knowledge, then we shall be contributing to the destruction and misery of the world.

And he continues by saying that,

We may be highly educated, but if we are without deep integration of thought and feeling, our lives are incomplete, contradictory, and torn with many fears; and as long as education does not cultivate an integrated outlook on life, it has very little significance.

By following this paradigm, we can now have a sketch of what a humane education which includes deep integration within the human person and not just mere intellectual or skill specialization.

The Three Main Facets of a Humane Education

In order for there to be deep integration of the human person, education must consist of three special facets, namely, normative, evaluative, and transformative education.

Normative Education

Normative education has to do with providing a conception of the good according to how it is understood by a particular (set of) tradition(s). Any form of education must provide a basis or a conception of what the good life consists of and so serve as a moral compass that would guide individual's actions. Such a normative conception of the good life must not, however be, a strict formulation of dogmatic teaching that stifles human freedom but must rather serve as a rough and ready guide – a valuational schema – that guides people toward creative action. Furthermore, such an education must delineate the realm where truths can be observed objectively and where they must be approached with, as

Kierkegaard would say, infinite passion. Such a normative conception of education would thus not entail the possession of objective certainty when it comes to the matters that really matter such as the existential meaning of life and faith but rather must provide guideposts that point towards the possible and rational truth of such areas of human life.

Moreover, such normative conceptions of the good must be balanced out by raising cognizance of the existence of other belief systems that are different but not necessarily inferior to the one that is dominant within one's particular society. Furthermore, awareness must be raised as to the history and numerous historiographies/genealogies of one's deeply held beliefs such that the space for critical questioning and true appropriation of such normative conceptions may be made possible instead of just blind adherence to dogma or the living out of life based simply on ideals inherited as cultural artifacts brought about by one's historicity.

Evaluative Education

The second important facet of a humane education lies in its capability to enable individuals to be evaluative agents when it comes to matters of identity, beliefs, and practices. This entails being able to criticize one's own normative conceptions of the good as well as other conceptions of the good and to decide for oneself which among these vying alternatives one would deeply attach oneself to. Reasoned choice and not blind adherence to tradition should be the norm for affiliation and identification with these schemas of thinking and valuing. Furthermore, the cultivation of such an evaluative capability would also entail within it an openness and not just mere tolerance of other traditions. Thus, it would include a form of hospitality that is more becoming of multiculturalism instead of mere plural monoculturalism where there are no interactions between various traditions that go side by side with one another (Sen 2006, 157). Such an openness would provide the space for the fruitful interchange of ideas and horizons to occur.

Aside from openness and the capability to evaluate conceptions of the good, this form of education focuses on the cultivation not only of horizontal reasoning but also and more importantly, that of vertical reasoning. Put more specifically, vertical reasoning entails the cultivation of the capability to examine the value that individuals attach to things of this world. Thus, a humane education must necessarily be philosophical in nature if we are to follow Josef Pieper's (1963, 98) thought that philosophy consists not in a withdrawal from the things of the world but of a withdrawal from the meanings and values that we attach to the things of the world. This temporary withdrawal from the values attached to the things of the world provides the much-needed space to reflect whether one's valuations are indeed aligned with those that would enable one to creatively flourish.

Transformative Education

Finally, such an education must be transformative of the individual both in his/her individual life as well as in his/her participation in societal affairs. This is important because society is itself the primary domain where such concrete self-actualization occurs. Thus, the development of oneself and society is necessary for the cultivation of one's life and the fulfilment of one's personal projects. Education must therefore lead to integration and praxis, and not just mere intellection and especially not just blind specialization without knowing the ultimate why's and how's involved in such expansion of knowledge and skills. Education, if it is to be done right, must lead towards the cultivation of a sense of social responsibility and solidarity with others such that people exercise their freedom as a form of social commitment instead of merely serving their selfish interests. Such a transformative education can only be brought about through the right balance between normative and evaluative education.

Ultimately, transformative education is none other than ethical education that enables one to actualize one's reasoned conception of the good in society where other people are also actualizing their own conceptions of the good. These reasoned conceptions of the good are themselves the result of one's inherited traditions and the process of a humane education that would hopefully result in the cultivation of conceptions of the good that are in line with the dignity of the human being and which provide the space for creative human flourishing. The individual's conception of the good must in turn be open and sensitive to how others conceive the good life and it is only when such creative interaction between individuals occur that education can truly be said to have achieved its purpose.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show what a sketch of a humane education would look like based on the description of the human agent as a *persona* that seeks to actualize itself according to his/her conception of the good. Such an education must consist not merely of the cultivation of intellectual and practical skills but must fundamentally entail integration of the human person. This integration is made possible through transformative education that is brought about by the dynamic interaction between normative and evaluative education that cultivates one's capability to reason out and conceive of a good life that is really conducive to self-flourishing. This is the primary means and is itself an end toward the expansion of the substantive freedom of people to lead the lives they value and have reason to value.

References

- Krishnamurti, Jiddu. 1996. "Education and the Significance of Life." In *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti*, 88-92. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Pieper, Josef. 1963. "The Philosophical Act." In *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, 69-125. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Rodriguez, Agustin. 2008. *Pag-ibig ang Katwiran ng Kasaysayan: Tadhana at Kapalaran sa Pilosopiya ng Kasaysayan ni Max Scheler*. Quezon: Office of Research and Publications, Ateneo de Manila University.
- Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sen, Amartya. 2006. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.