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THE EDUCATIONAL WRITINGS OF JOHN LOCKE

INTRODUCTION

THE most general charge brought by its contemporaries against the school-room of the seventeenth century was that it failed to adapt its ideals to the profound changes which were becoming manifest in social life. Throughout Europe the school maintained the cosmopolitan type of instruction which was the natural correlative of the medieval Church and Empire. It ignored, or affected to ignore, the spirit of nationalism which was everywhere manifest; consequently, it taught no modern languages, and made no open and avowed use of modern history, literature, or geography. It admitted grudgingly a little commercial arithmetic amongst its studies, as a concession to the same demand which, at a later date, caused schools to offer teaching in shorthand or typewriting; and this was in the age of Descartes and Isaac Newton. Of modern science, then come to the birth, and of the widespread readiness to carry observation and experiment into the realm of "Nature," the school took no account.

It is true that the "new philosophy" was not yet sufficiently advanced, elaborated, and systematized to be made an agent of education. Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) deprecated the notion that the new body would encroach upon the work of the universities, seeing that its studies were unsuited to undergraduates.

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But the extension of the bounds of knowledge was obvious, and many shared Bacon's enthusiastic belief in the possibility of greater achievements to come. Outside the schools the monopoly of knowledge and wisdom which had once been conceded to the ancients was gradually breaking down, in consequence of the newer methods of inquiry, directed by a spirit which cared little for the pretensions of authority. With Bacon the newer men were ready to urge that *they* were the ancients; the assertion carried with it a claim for the official recognition of modern studies, and the hope of insuring "the relief of man's estate" carried the new method into every field of investigation.

In spite of changed circumstances, the schools preserved unaltered the traditional course of much Latin, some Greek, and, far less frequently, some Hebrew; the learning of the great biblical scholars had effected an entrance where the new philosophy had failed. We must not, of course, think of the Latin of the seventeenth-century school as we think of a "subject" in a modern curriculum—that is, as a single branch of knowledge lying within well-defined boundaries. But the greater part of a boy's school-life was devoted to the formal side of the study of Latin, the memorizing of the grammar book (in Latin) during the earlier years, and rhetorical training in prose and verse during the later.

As part of the new order of things, domestic comfort was more generally enjoyed and appreciated, and a greater refinement in manners and in taste followed. Nevertheless, the schools retained a roughness of life and of behaviour which had become an anachronism; and boys left home for school at an age which, to-day, would find them in the Kindergarten. Eton and Westminster were the most noted English schools of Locke's day; he was a boy at the latter when Busby was in his prime. "Westminsters" became a byword for turbulence and worse, and the savagery of the Eton "ram-hunt" survived for nearly half a century after Locke's death. The novelists and essayists of the early eighteenth century

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frequently attribute the unpopularity of schools to the fears of weakly indulgent mothers; a more convincing explanation may be found in the contrast between the life of the home and that of the boarding-school.[1]

Throughout the seventeenth century the schools continued to lose their hold upon the socially distinguished class, and the process was accelerated as the studies and manners of school-boys departed more widely from its social ideals. The schools imparted "learning," and learning was something of a trade, unsuitable to men of position or of affluence. Referring to her son, Colin, a Westminster boy, Lady Caithness writes, in 1692: "Som says the Scool he is at is mo proper for to breed up youths for Church men than any other station; I supos my sons inclination will not be for that post."[2] Owners of great estates frequently educated their sons at home under a private tutor; and the fashion spread amongst country gentlemen. Fielding's "Squire Western" in *Tom Jones* (1749) embodies the failure of the system; contemporary evidence shows the failure was not uncommon. But its success produced the accomplished *virtuoso* and man of the world, whose powers had been stimulated and strengthened by a residence of two or three years in one of the Inns of Court, where he found access to good society, the sojourn in London being followed by a prolonged tour in France and Italy.

The domestic part of this education was a survival from the Middle Ages, when the knight's training customarily began by an apprenticeship, first as page, next as squire, in the household and service of some great noble, or prince. Here the novice learned the management of his horse and weapons, practised bodily exercises, and acquired such social accomplishments as dancing and music; the ladies of the house grounded him in good manners whilst he served as

[1] On this point, see *Some Thoughts*, etc., sec. 70.

[2] Sargeaunt, *Annals of Westminster School*, p. 289. *Cf. Some Thoughts*, sec. 94: "A great part of the learning now in fashion," etc.

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page. The Renascence added a new element, the admiration of letters and a desire for the knowledge to be got from books. The combination of the medieval tradition with these newer aspirations found expression in a series of books which expounded the "doctrine of courtesy," as the education of the prince, nobleman, and gentleman came to be called. Castiglione's *Courtier*, the most celebrated of the books of courtesy, is also the earliest (1516-1528); amongst English courtesy books are Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governour* (1531), Henry Peacham's *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622), Jean Gailhard's book bearing a similar title (1678), and Stephen Penton's *The Guardian's Instructor* (1688).[1] Milton's *Of Education* (1644) and Locke's *Some Thoughts concerning Education* and *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* are written from a very similar standpoint. The main principles of this new type of education are stated by Montaigne, particularly in the essays, *De l'Institution des Enfants* and *Du Pedantisme* (1580).

The kind of education advocated in these books was beyond the resources of the school; and, though instruction in the many branches of knowledge which it required could in Locke's day be had in Oxford and Cambridge, mainly from private teachers, the official course of university education was quite unlike it. In France, private enterprise, or munificence, opened "academies" which were expressly intended to educate after the pattern of the doctrine of courtesy; and these late sixteenth and early seventeenth century institutions had many German imitators. Persistent attempts were made throughout the seventeenth century to establish academies of a like kind in England, but they all failed. Milton wrote the tractate already mentioned to advocate the foundation of an academy, which would make it needless for Englishmen to seek courtly breeding in a foreign land.

The academies laid great stress upon the value of

[1] Locke seems to have had the books of Gailhard and Penton by him when he wrote *Some Thoughts*.

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modern studies, especially in languages and history; physical exercises, dancing, music, and social amenities generally were integral parts of their course. The seventeenth-century amateur commonly cherished some form of handwork as a hobby; and hobbies were taught in great variety in some of the academies.[1] The essentially useful character of a study was thought to be no bar to its adoption in the training of one who was to lead a public life; on the other hand, the academies made little account of exact scholarship, which they were apt to stigmatize as pedantry. They agreed with Locke in placing "learning" last and least, when compared with virtue, prudence, and good manners. Further, they agreed with him in acting upon a truth which is too often ignored in the present day, that education is a process by no means conducted in schools and universities alone, that mere school-work, as commonly understood, cannot by itself educate.

The writers on courtesy and the founders of the academies fully recognized that there are other forms of excellence than the purely intellectual; and, since expense presented no great difficulty to their pupils, they tried to frame a curriculum as varied as human capacity itself. The influence exercised by the doctrine of courtesy, thus expounded, upon later educational theory and practice has not been at all adequately realized; it is significant that France and Germany, the early homes of the academies, modernized their courses of study long before such a change was adopted by England, where academies never flourished.

Locke's place in educational history cannot be appreciated by attending only to his educational writings, or to the march of events in his own country. During the eighteenth century there was much theorizing concerning education in France and Germany, followed by attempts, more or less successful, to translate theory into practice. At the root of most of this theorizing lay the conceptions belonging to Locke's philosophy, particularly as this is

[1] *Cf. Some Thoughts*, secs. 201-209.

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set forth in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, a book which, after nearly twenty years of intermittent labour, was published in 1690.

The leading problem proposed in the *Essay* is an inquiry "into the original [origin], certainty, and extent of human knowledge." Waiving the metaphysical considerations which that inquiry suggests, and starting from the observable phenomena of consciousness, Locke treats his problem as primarily a psychological one, a question as to the origin of mind-content, or, in his own phrase, "of Ideas." His first conclusion is that the child's mental condition at birth is appropriately figured by "white paper, void of all characters,"[1] or, as it was afterwards expressed in *Some Thoughts*, "wax to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases."[2] Amongst other things the similes were intended to deny that man is born in possession of an equipment of general principles which spontaneously reveal themselves as occasion offers. "It is an established opinion amongst some men that there are in the understanding certain innate principles, some primary notions, *κοιναὶ ἔννοιαι*,[3] characters as it were stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being and brings into the world with it."[4] Against this established opinion Locke maintained his figure of the blank sheet or *tabula rasa;* ideas as they existed in an individual mind were the consequence of that mind's individual history. Experience is the writer who covers the blank sheet with characters, the sculptor who moulds the wax into well-defined shapes.

"Whence comes [the mind] by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it

[1] *Essay*, ii., chap. i., sec. 2.

[2] Sec. 216. Locke is inconsistent in his use of this simile, which attributes everything to nurture, nothing to Nature. A comparison of passages shows that Locke was disposed to magnify the effects of nurture above those of Nature, without entirely ignoring the latter. Compare the following: *Conduct*, secs. 2 and 4; and *Some Thoughts*, secs. 66, 101, 139, 176.

[3] Thoughts common to all men.

[4] *Essay*, i., chap. ii., sec. 1.

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with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from experience; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. First, our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them [*i.e.* the senses]. . . . This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses and derived from them to the understanding, I call Sensation. Secondly, the other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas, is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got; which operations when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas which could not be had from things without; and such are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all the different actings of our own minds; which we being conscious of and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas, as we do from bodies affecting our senses. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense. But as I call the other Sensation, so I call this Reflection."[1]

The dissociation from metaphysics, and the experimental origin assigned to mental development and con-

[1] *Essay*, ii., chap. i., secs. 2-4. It will be remarked that mental representations, processes, and states are all covered by the one name—Ideas.

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tent in these and in similar passages of the *Essay*, became the basis of the modern study of psychology, which may be said to date from the publication of that work; the comparative method, which plays a conspicuous part in the study to-day, is anticipated in principle by the casual though frequent references which Locke there makes to the mental processes of children,[1] of savages, and of idiots. Although he is careful to assign two "fountains" to experience—namely, sensation and reflection—the stress of Locke's exposition falls to excess upon the first-named, and it is therefore not surprising that he is sometimes regarded as the originator of a sensationalist rather than an experiential psychology. The misinterpretation is the easier on account of the confusion between ideas, processes, and states for which Locke is himself responsible; the later eighteenth-century educational theorists for the most part assume a purely sensationalist origin for the whole mental life.

One of the most characteristic features of the *Essay* is its uncompromising attitude towards dogmatism and the construction of abstract systems generally; its method demands a close adherence to reality, and full allowance for the results of concrete thinking. The claims of authority are confronted by the assertion of the absolute necessity for independence of mind. "Not that I want a due respect to other men's opinions; but after all the greatest reverence is due to truth; and I hope it will not be thought arrogance to say, that perhaps we should make greater progress in the discovery of rational and contemplative knowledge, if we sought it in the fountain and made use rather of our own thoughts than other men's to find it; for I think we may as rationally hope to see with other men's eyes as to know by other men's understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of truth and reason, so much we possess of real and true knowledge. The floating of other men's

[1] The reader will also note the frequent occurrence in *Some Thoughts* of anecdotes of children—*e.g.*, secs. 78, 166, 178, and in the dedication to Clarke.

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opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was science is in us but opiniatrety,[1] whilst we give up our assent only to reverend names, and do not, as they did, employ our own reason to understand those truths which gave them reputation."[2]

Locke is here asserting the sufficiency of reason for the discovery of truth, and the obligation of each individual mind to employ reason for that purpose, two principles, rationalism and individualism, which made great play in the life of the eighteenth century, and especially in the prevalent conceptions respecting education. Locke thus became the prophet of rationalism and the originator of teaching which proved to be a greater solvent than he at all realized. He himself was a convinced believer in the truth of revealed religion, and, amongst other writings on the subject, produced in 1695 an *Essay on the Reasonableness* [characteristic word !] *of Christianity as delivered in the Scriptures*, which became an object of controversy to some of the orthodox. Yet the principles of the *Essay on Human Understanding* were a principal cause of the subsequent English deism, and of that attitude towards all assertions of the supernatural which has marked French thought since the time of Locke's admirer and disciple, Voltaire. Indeed, Locke's discussion of the problem of knowledge, owing to its fundamental incompleteness, leads straight to the conclusion that the problem is unanswerable, that certainty is unattainable, and that scepticism on all subjects is the only consistent position open to the philosopher. The *Essay* does not indeed go so far as this, although a sceptical temper is not without illustration in its pages. "But whilst we are destitute of senses acute enough to discover the minute particles of bodies and to give us ideas of their mechanical affections, we must be content to be ignorant of their properties and ways of operation; nor can we be assured about them

[1] *I.e.*, obstinate adherence to one's own opinion.
[2] *Essay*, i., chap. iv., sec. 23. *Cf. Conduct*, sec. 24.

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any farther than some few trials we make are able to reach. *But whether they will succeed again another time we cannot be certain.* This hinders our certain knowledge of universal truths concerning natural bodies, and our reason carries us herein very little beyond particular matter of fact. And therefore I am apt to doubt how far soever human industry may advance useful and experimental philosophy in physical things, scientifical will be still out of our reach."[1] This inherent scepticism was evident from the first to some of Locke's opponents, though not to all; it became manifest a generation after Locke's death in the teaching of David Hume, and in that form aroused Kant to controvert it.

The influence of Descartes upon French thought did not yield at once to the philosophy of the Englishman who supplanted him. "It took more than twenty years to sell off the first edition of the French translation [of the *Essay*], but from 1723 to 1758 editions followed one another in rapid succession at intervals of about six years.[2] Voltaire had been a serious student of Bacon, Locke, and Newton during his exile in this country, from 1726 to 1729; in 1734 Europe received the result of his studies in the *Lettres sur les Anglais*. Locke's teaching was also made familiar in foreign philosophical circles by Condillac's *Origine des Connaissances humaines* (1746) and *Traité des Sensations* (1754). From this period onwards the sensationalist element of Locke's psychology speedily made its way abroad, till it became the philosophical creed of the French and German "intellectuals," thus giving a new and much more extended lease of life to doctrines which were not complete novelties to the countrymen of Montaigne, Bayle, and Fontenelle.

It is true that the half-century between the accession of Frederick the Great in 1740 and the death of Joseph II. of Austria is usually known by the German name "die

[1] *Essay*, iv., chap. iii., secs. 25-26. *Cf. Some Thoughts*, secs. 190, 193.
[2] Fowler's *Locke*, p. 7.

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