FIVE YEARS

IN AN

ENGLISH UNIVERSITY.

THE CAMBRIDGE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN ITS INTELLECTUAL RESULTS.

Κρεῖττον γάρ που σμικρὸν εὖ ἢ πολὺ μὴ ἱκανῶς περᾶναι.

PLATO, THEAT. 187, E.

THERE are some subjects in treating of which we can plunge *in medias res*. The subject of this chapter is not such a one. We must, in discussing it, bear in mind the Frenchman's advice, to "begin at the beginning." Before investigating the merits of any particular scheme of education, we must understand clearly what we mean by education, and what we consider to be the object of it. This going back to first principles is, doubtless, a great bore in many cases, as where the Congressman, recorded by Sands, began his speech on a question of paving Pennsylvania Avenue with a historical dissertation on the Constitution of the United States; and such an announcement made formally at this stage of a book is very like admonishing the adventurous reader who has travelled so far that now is the time for him

to repose after his labors. Nevertheless, it is very necessary on some occasions, if he would avoid that satisfactory state of things which is called in Latin *controversia*, and in English *cross purposes*. For the term *education* is a tolerably comprehensive one, covers a great deal of ground, and may be taken in a great many different acceptations. Ask one man to define *education* for you, and he will tell you (truly enough, too, in one sense) that everything which a man passes through in his life is a part of his education for this world or the next. Ask another what he understands by education, and he will answer your question most Socratically by another, or a string of others,—"education of whom, and for what? —a lawyer's education, a doctor's, a merchant's?" And if you tell him "a man's," he will be still less able to give you a direct reply. Ask a third what the end of education is, and he tells you, *ore rotundo*, that it is "to qualify men to do good," which is a magnificent sentiment to hear, only if you come to cross question this gentleman as to the particular kinds of "good" that men are to be qualified to do, you will find them to include robbery of private individuals, resistance to public authority, and a general propensity to upset everything established.

There are certainly some very odd ideas on this same subject of education afloat among us. Here, for instance, is a passage which I find in a book called *Hints towards Reforms*,* a series of lectures and discourses delivered by Mr. Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*.

* P. 211.

"The youth who fancies himself educated because he has fully mastered ever so many branches of mere school learning, is laboring under a deplorable and perilous delusion. He may have learned all that the schools, the seminaries, and even our miscalled universities, necessarily teach, and still be a pitiably ignorant man, unable to earn a week's subsistence, to resist the promptings of a perverted appetite, or to shield himself from such common results of physical depravity as Dyspepsia, Hypochondria, and Nervous Derangement. A master of *Greek and Hebrew* who does not know how to *grow Potatoes*, and can be tempted to drown his reason in the intoxicating bowl, is far more imperfectly educated than many an unlettered backwoodsman."

Now, as regards the "intoxicating bowl," it is certainly a terrible defect in a man's *morale* that he should habitually get drunk, so it is, for that matter, that he should habitually advocate Anti-Rentism, or any other species of robbery; but I do not perceive that his education has *necessarily* anything to do with the one or the other. He may have a hereditary propensity to drink or plunder which no education can eradicate, and which can only be repressed or punished by other influences, or he may have started in the world a sober and honest man, and have afterwards become perverted by warping influences. But I wish to call particular attention to the words which I have italicized, and the proposition which they convey, to wit, that to grow, or, in more correct English, to *raise* potatoes (to the dignity of which vegetable Mr. G. has further testified by the big P he employs in spelling it) is a more essential branch of education than Greek and Hebrew.

Now, methinks, a reader of ordinary capacity and reflection, if he had his attention attracted by such a passage, and were led to compare for himself the relative value of the two things referred to as elements of education, would, in the first place, be likely to inquire the amount of labor and time respectively necessary to become a master of the two things. And I fancy the result of his examination would be that a thorough knowledge of Greek and Hebrew requires assiduous application to them for a number of years, probably seven or eight, at least, while the Science of Raising Potatoes may be conquered in a few seasons, perhaps months, taken at intervals. And this consideration would not improbably lead him to the conclusion that, so far at any rate, the scholar had acquired the more valuable part of education, because, supposing them compelled to change places, he could learn to raise potatoes much sooner than the potatoe-grower could learn Greek and Hebrew, provided their abilities were equal. This, then, would suggest another question, as to the relative amount of mind and capacity requisite to make a Greek scholar and a raiser of potatoes. To this, I imagine, he would not be very long in finding an answer, that to make a Greek and Hebrew scholar a man required to be, not a transcendent genius certainly, but a person of fair capacity, rather above than under the average intellect; that to be a scholar is not τοῦ τυχοντός, or, in plain English, possible for every man that you may pick up in the street; that if the scholar is not necessarily a Mercury, neither is he such a stick as can be made out of any wood; and much more to the same purpose,

which Mr. Greeley himself would hardly make bold to call in question; while, on the other hand, it would appear to him that any man not naturally an idiot is capable of being instructed in the cultivation of potatoes, as the example of the Irish peasantry fully shows, who excel in that cultivation, though very poorly off for intellectual endowments. Hence the conclusion would not unnaturally follow, that the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew was in itself a stronger evidence of a man's being something out of the common than the knowledge of raising potatoes, and therefore more valuable to a man in giving him a start in life.

Further, as *education* must be admitted, from the nature of the case, to have some effect on the material subjected to its influence, our reader will be induced to ask, how far the study of Greek and Hebrew, on the one hand, and the learning to raise potatoes on the other, respectively improve a man or a nation, morally or mentally. And here, I think, the result of his investigations will be, that the study of Greek and Hebrew has been generally allowed to improve the intellectual faculties—what faculties it improves, or to what extent, may be a mooted point, but that it does improve some of them, and in some appreciable degree, is almost universally conceded, and that nations famous for their knowledge of Greek, such as the Germans and English, hold a high intellectual rank in other respects; whereas in the culture of potatoes there is nothing that necessarily improves a man intellectually or morally, and in the case of a nation devoted to it, the Irish aforesaid for instance, it has been

allowed on all hands to retard the moral, mental, and even physical improvement of the nation; so that here again he will be apt to conclude that the Greek and Hebrew have the best of it.

But there is another light in which the student may view the question. He may look at it as a mere matter of dollars, and those dollars gained by no indirect process, but the immediate fruit of the two pursuits. To be sure this is a dreadfully low way of regarding the subject, but we had better come down to it for the satisfaction of those who profess to be nothing if not practical. Even weighed in this balance, I think the Greek will preponderate over the potatoes. Putting out of the question any other mode of "realizing" his literary acquisitions, a good scholar can always get his living as a teacher; I do not say a thoroughly comfortable living or as good a living as he ought to have in all cases, but a better living than a man can get by raising potatoes; and in any civilized country can command the services of more than one potatoe-raiser. Many a scholar may have difficulty in helping himself in some of the most ordinary occurrences of every-day life, and still be driving a very lucrative trade by his scholarship. I knew a Senior Wrangler so green in all apparatus relative to horses, that once when we were riding out together and his curb-chain unfastened, he very soberly set to work to refasten it *over the animal's nose;* but this very man was making more money at the time than the sharpest hostler at the most frequented livery stable ever did.

And this brings on one question more; in what condition of society *will* the knowledge of raising potatoes be of more pecuniary advantage to its possessor and more value to the community generally than the knowledge of Greek and Hebrew? And the answer is most obvious: *in the very first and primitive stage*—in an unsettled country—in the backwoods of a newly discovered territory—among that shipwrecked crew on a desert island whom Locke took as an example of his fancied "state of nature." There all men are hewers of wood and drawers of water, tillers of the soil, shooters of wild beasts or savages. There all elegancies of mind or body are out of place and premature, because every one's attention is absorbed in satisfying the immediate wants of life. There the confectioner and the scholar, the French milliner and the German metaphysician are alike useless drones; the carpenter is a prince (as he was in Homer's time), and the historical painter cumbereth the earth. There and there only is Mr. Greeley's assertion a correct one.

By the time the student has carried his speculations thus far he will be able to appreciate pretty correctly the comparative value of the Greek preferred by his humble servant the author, and the potatoe-raising commended by Mr. Greeley; and he will also have had a neat illustration of a position maintained by many wise and good men—*that Socialism tends to put the lowest kind of work above the highest, and therefore, so far from advancing, as it pretends to do, the course of civilization, goes directly to pervert and retard it, and to throw the world back to the ages of barbarism.*

Returning from this partial digression and turning to a much higher being in the scale of animated nature than Mr. Greeley, we find this idea in the lectures of Professor Maurice, of the London University; that from all the various systems and definitions of education ever proposed may be evolved three distinct doctrines; the first, that the end of education is *development of the faculties;* the second, that it is the *restraint* of certain faculties; the third, that it is the giving of information.* (This is not the order in which he enumerates them, but as it is their historical order, I prefer stating them so.) For illustrations of these three principles carried out purely—so far as it is possible to keep them unmixed—he refers to Athens, Sparta, and the modern Utilitarian school.

This division I am disposed to accept as an important first step in our investigation.

The first and second of these principles appear to be in direct contradiction, but it is the first and third which really clash, for the second looks chiefly to a particular set of faculties, different from those which are the main object of the first. In other words the idea of *development* has more reference to our *intellectual;* that of *restraint* more to our *moral* education. As a general rule there are more mental faculties that require *developing*, and more moral propensities that require restraining. The illustrations chosen by the Professor show this; the Athenian education

* See his Lectures on Education; first Lecture or Chapter.

wonderfully sharpened the intellect at the expense of the morals, the Spartan education left the intellect untouched; it is no exaggeration to say of the Lacedemonians that they were *illiterate on principle;* whatever in their education was not physical, was moral. Such being the case, I put out of question for the present the second principle, not because a man's moral nature is not, in my estimation, of infinitely more importance than his intellectual, but for the same reason that in examining the other two principles I shall set aside the questions of *physical* development and of information on subjects pertaining expressly to the *physique* of the student, although I hold that the body is the very first thing to be attended to, for if a man's body is not in good working condition, he will seldom be able to apply himself so as to improve his mind to the best advantage; and if his *physique* is much out of order, his *morale* is very apt to be injuriously affected. But I regard the improvement and education of the mind as the special business of a College or University; just as I would say that the special business of one particular Faculty—a Law school, for instance, is to teach law; and I should expect the graduates of a given College or University to be men of more intellectual power and refinement than the mass of the community; if they were not, I should immediately conclude there was something wrong in the University course; but if they were not stronger or healthier, or more moral men than the rest of the community, I do not say that I should be perfectly satisfied, but I should be inclined to withhold my censure so long as they did

not fall *below* the average in these respects, nor should I immediately set down their want of physical and moral superiority as the fault of the Institution. In all this I may be wrong; however, my plan has at any rate the advantage of enabling us to consider one thing at a time; to examine by themselves the intellectual advantages or disadvantages of the Cambridge system and then to compare them with those of any other, first similarly examined apart.

Now the University of Cambridge adopts the *first* rather than the third of the theories above enunciated as the true theory of a liberal education. It does not propose to itself as its primary object the *giving* of *information*, but rather the developing and training of the mind, so that it may receive, arrange, retain, and use to the best advantage, such information as may be afterwards desirable or necessary—such information as it may be the business of professional teachers to supply it, or its pleasure to collect for itself. For this training the University has decided, not in blind obedience to precedent, for the subject is undergoing discussion within its precincts every day—that classical and mathematical studies are the best means, and it undertakes to teach them thoroughly. Here, at the outset, a difficulty arises which is satisfactorily provided for. Neither the preparation nor the abilities of those who enter on any college or university course at the same time being equal, it is a question with all academical authorities, how to make a class work together so that the dull ones shall not retard, nor the bright ones hurry the rest, and that all shall be kept busy