

# Education as Conservative and Progressive

## 1. Education as Formation

We now come to a type of theory which denies the existence of faculties and emphasizes the unique role of subject matter in the development of mental and moral disposition. According to it, education is neither a process of unfolding from within nor is it a training of faculties resident in mind itself. It is rather the formation of mind by setting up certain associations or connections of content by means of a subject matter presented from without. Education proceeds by instruction taken in a strictly literal sense, a building into the mind from without. That education is formative of mind is not questioned; it is the conception already propounded. But formation here has a technical meaning dependent upon the idea of something operating from without. Herbart is the best historical representative of this type of theory. He denies absolutely the existence of innate faculties. The mind is simply endowed with the power of producing various qualities in reaction to the various realities which act upon it. These qualitatively different reactions are called presentations (Vorstellungen). Every presentation once called into being persists; it may be driven below the "threshold" of consciousness by new and stronger presentations, produced by the reaction of the soul to new material, but its activity continues by its own inherent momentum, below the surface of consciousness. What are termed faculties - attention, memory, thinking, perception, even the sentiments, are arrangements, associations, and complications, formed by the interaction of these submerged presentations with one another and with new presentations. Perception, for example, is the complication

of presentations which result from the rise of old presentations to greet and combine with new ones; memory is the evoking of an old presentation above the threshold of consciousness by getting entangled with another presentation, etc. Pleasure is the result of reinforcement among the independent activities of presentations; pain of their pulling different ways, etc.

The concrete character of mind consists, then, wholly of the various arrangements formed by the various presentations in their different qualities. The "furniture" of the mind is the mind. Mind is wholly a matter of "contents." The educational implications of this doctrine are threefold.

(1) This or that kind of mind is formed by the use of objects which evoke this or that kind of reaction and which produce this or that arrangement among the reactions called out. The formation of mind is wholly a matter of the presentation of the proper educational materials.

(2) Since the earlier presentations constitute the "apperceiving organs" which control the assimilation of new presentations, their character is all important. The effect of new presentations is to reinforce groupings previously formed. The business of the educator is, first, to select the proper material in order to fix the nature of the original reactions, and, secondly, to arrange the sequence of subsequent presentations on the basis of the store of ideas secured by prior transactions. The control is from behind, from the past, instead of, as in the unfolding conception, in the ultimate goal.

(3) Certain formal steps of all method in teaching may be laid down. Presentation of new subject matter is obviously the central thing, but since knowing consists in the way in which this interacts with the contents already submerged below consciousness, the first thing is the step of "preparation," - that is, calling into special activity and getting above the floor of consciousness those older presentations

which are to assimilate the new one. Then after the presentation, follow the processes of interaction of new and old; then comes the application of the newly formed content to the performance of some task. Everything must go through this course; consequently there is a perfectly uniform method in instruction in all subjects for all pupils of all ages.

Herbart's great service lay in taking the work of teaching out of the region of routine and accident. He brought it into the sphere of conscious method; it became a conscious business with a definite aim and procedure, instead of being a compound of casual inspiration and subservience to tradition. Moreover, everything in teaching and discipline could be specified, instead of our having to be content with vague and more or less mystic generalities about ultimate ideals and speculative spiritual symbols. He abolished the notion of ready-made faculties, which might be trained by exercise upon any sort of material, and made attention to concrete subject matter, to the content, all-important. Herbart undoubtedly has had a greater influence in bringing to the front questions connected with the material of study than any other educational philosopher. He stated problems of method from the standpoint of their connection with subject matter: method having to do with the manner and sequence of presenting new subject matter to insure its proper interaction with old.

The fundamental theoretical defect of this view lies in ignoring the existence in a living being of active and specific functions which are developed in the redirection and combination which occur as they are occupied with their environment. The theory represents the Schoolmaster come to his own. This fact expresses at once its strength and its weakness. The conception that the mind consists of what has been taught, and that the importance of what has been taught consists in its availability for further teaching, reflects the pedagogue's view of life. The philosophy is eloquent about the duty of the teacher in instructing pupils; it is almost silent regarding his

privilege of learning. It emphasizes the influence of intellectual environment upon the mind; it slurs over the fact that the environment involves a personal sharing in common experiences. It exaggerates beyond reason the possibilities of consciously formulated and used methods, and underestimates the role of vital, unconscious, attitudes. It insists upon the old, the past, and passes lightly over the operation of the genuinely novel and unforeseeable. It takes, in brief, everything educational into account save its essence, - vital energy seeking opportunity for effective exercise. All education forms character, mental and moral, but formation consists in the selection and coordination of native activities so that they may utilize the subject matter of the social environment. Moreover, the formation is not only a formation of native activities, but it takes place through them. It is a process of reconstruction, reorganization.

## **2. Education as Recapitulation and Retrospection**

A peculiar combination of the ideas of development and formation from without has given rise to the recapitulation theory of education, biological and cultural. The individual develops, but his proper development consists in repeating in orderly stages the past evolution of animal life and human history. The former recapitulation occurs physiologically; the latter should be made to occur by means of education. The alleged biological truth that the individual in his growth from the simple embryo to maturity repeats the history of the evolution of animal life in the progress of forms from the simplest to the most complex (or expressed technically, that ontogenesis parallels phylogenesis) does not concern us, save as it is supposed to afford scientific foundation for cultural recapitulation of the past. Cultural recapitulation says, first, that children at a certain age are in the mental and moral condition of savagery; their instincts are vagrant and predatory because their ancestors at one time lived such a life. Consequently (so it is concluded) the proper subject matter of their

education at this time is the material - especially the literary material of myths, folk-tale, and song - produced by humanity in the analogous stage. Then the child passes on to something corresponding, say, to the pastoral stage, and so on till at the time when he is ready to take part in contemporary life, he arrives at the present epoch of culture.

In this detailed and consistent form, the theory, outside of a small school in Germany (followers of Herbart for the most part), has had little currency. But the idea which underlies it is that education is essentially retrospective; that it looks primarily to the past and especially to the literary products of the past, and that mind is adequately formed in the degree in which it is patterned upon the spiritual heritage of the past. This idea has had such immense influence upon higher instruction especially, that it is worth examination in its extreme formulation.

In the first place, its biological basis is fallacious. Embryonic growth of the human infant preserves, without doubt, some of the traits of lower forms of life. But in no respect is it a strict traversing of past stages. If there were any strict "law" of repetition, evolutionary development would clearly not have taken place. Each new generation would simply have repeated its predecessors' existence. Development, in short, has taken place by the entrance of shortcuts and alterations in the prior scheme of growth. And this suggests that the aim of education is to facilitate such short-circuited growth. The great advantage of immaturity, educationally speaking, is that it enables us to emancipate the young from the need of dwelling in an outgrown past. The business of education is rather to liberate the young from reviving and retraversing the past than to lead them to a recapitulation of it. The social environment of the young is constituted by the presence and action of the habits of thinking and feeling of civilized men. To ignore the directive influence of this present environment upon the young is simply to abdicate the educational function. A biologist has said: "The history of development in different animals. . . offers to us. . . a series of ingenious, determined, varied

but more or less unsuccessful efforts to escape from the necessity of recapitulating, and to substitute for the ancestral method a more direct method." Surely it would be foolish if education did not deliberately attempt to facilitate similar efforts in conscious experience so that they become increasingly successful.

The two factors of truth in the conception may easily be disentangled from association with the false context which perverts them. On the biological side we have simply the fact that any infant starts with precisely the assortment of impulsive activities with which he does start, they being blind, and many of them conflicting with one another, casual, sporadic, and unadapted to their immediate environment. The other point is that it is a part of wisdom to utilize the products of past history so far as they are of help for the future. Since they represent the results of prior experience, their value for future experience may, of course, be indefinitely great. Literatures produced in the past are, so far as men are now in possession and use of them, a part of the present environment of individuals; but there is an enormous difference between availing ourselves of them as present resources and taking them as standards and patterns in their retrospective character.

(1) The distortion of the first point usually comes about through misuse of the idea of heredity. It is assumed that heredity means that past life has somehow predetermined the main traits of an individual, and that they are so fixed that little serious change can be introduced into them. Thus taken, the influence of heredity is opposed to that of the environment, and the efficacy of the latter belittled. But for educational purposes heredity means neither more nor less than the original endowment of an individual. Education must take the being as he is; that a particular individual has just such and such an equipment of native activities is a basic fact. That they were produced in such and such a way, or that they are derived from one's ancestry, is not especially important for the educator, however it may be with the biologist, as compared with the fact that they now exist. Suppose one

had to advise or direct a person regarding his inheritance of property. The fallacy of assuming that the fact it is an inheritance, predetermines its future use, is obvious. The advisor is concerned with making the best use of what is there - putting it at work under the most favorable conditions. Obviously he cannot utilize what is not there; neither can the educator. In this sense, heredity is a limit of education. Recognition of this fact prevents the waste of energy and the irritation that ensue from the too prevalent habit of trying to make by instruction something out of an individual which he is not naturally fitted to become. But the doctrine does not determine what use shall be made of the capacities which exist. And, except in the case of the imbecile, these original capacities are much more varied and potential, even in the case of the more stupid, than we as yet know properly how to utilize. Consequently, while a careful study of the native aptitudes and deficiencies of an individual is always a preliminary necessity, the subsequent and important step is to furnish an environment which will adequately function whatever activities are present. The relation of heredity and environment is well expressed in the case of language. If a being had no vocal organs from which issue articulate sounds, if he had no auditory or other sense-receptors and no connections between the two sets of apparatus, it would be a sheer waste of time to try to teach him to converse. He is born short in that respect, and education must accept the limitation. But if he has this native equipment, its possession in no way guarantees that he will ever talk any language or what language he will talk. The environment in which his activities occur and by which they are carried into execution settles these things. If he lived in a dumb unsocial environment where men refused to talk to one another and used only that minimum of gestures without which they could not get along, vocal language would be as unachieved by him as if he had no vocal organs. If the sounds which he makes occur in a medium of persons speaking the Chinese language, the activities which make like sounds will be selected and coordinated. This illustration may be applied to the entire range of the educability of any individual. It places the heritage from the past in its right connection with the demands and

opportunities of the present.

(2) The theory that the proper subject matter of instruction is found in the culture-products of past ages (either in general, or more specifically in the particular literatures which were produced in the culture epoch which is supposed to correspond with the stage of development of those taught) affords another instance of that divorce between the process and product of growth which has been criticized. To keep the process alive, to keep it alive in ways which make it easier to keep it alive in the future, is the function of educational subject matter. But an individual can live only in the present. The present is not just something which comes after the past; much less something produced by it. It is what life is in leaving the past behind it. The study of past products will not help us understand the present, because the present is not due to the products, but to the life of which they were the products. A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise. And the mistake of making the records and remains of the past the main material of education is that it cuts the vital connection of present and past, and tends to make the past a rival of the present and the present a more or less futile imitation of the past. Under such circumstances, culture becomes an ornament and solace; a refuge and an asylum. Men escape from the crudities of the present to live in its imagined refinements, instead of using what the past offers as an agency for ripening these crudities. The present, in short, generates the problems which lead us to search the past for suggestion, and which supplies meaning to what we find when we search. The past is the past precisely because it does not include what is characteristic in the present. The moving present includes the past on condition that it uses the past to direct its own movement. The past is a great resource for the imagination; it adds a new dimension to life, but OD condition that it be seen as the past of the present, and not as another and disconnected world. The principle which makes little of the present act of living and operation of growing, the only thing always present, naturally looks to the past because the future goal which it sets up is



remote and empty. But having turned its back upon the present, it has no way of returning to it laden with the spoils of the past. A mind that is adequately sensitive to the needs and occasions of the present actuality will have the liveliest of motives for interest in the background of the present, and will never have to hunt for a way back because it will never have lost connection.

### **3. Education as Reconstruction**

In its contrast with the ideas both of unfolding of latent powers from within, and of the formation from without, whether by physical nature or by the cultural products of the past, the ideal of growth results in the conception that education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end - the direct transformation of the quality of experience. Infancy, youth, adult life, - all stand on the same educative level in the sense that what is really learned at any and every stage of experience constitutes the value of that experience, and in the sense that it is the chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning.

We thus reach a technical definition of education: It is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. (1) The increment of meaning corresponds to the increased perception of the connections and continuities of the activities in which we are engaged. The activity begins in an impulsive form; that is, it is blind. It does not know what it is about; that is to say, what are its interactions with other activities. An activity which brings education or instruction with it makes one aware of some of the connections which had been imperceptible. To recur to our simple example, a child who reaches for a bright light gets burned. Henceforth he knows that a certain act

of touching in connection with a certain act of vision (and vice-versa) means heat and pain; or, a certain light means a source of heat. The acts by which a scientific man in his laboratory learns more about flame differ no whit in principle. By doing certain things, he makes perceptible certain connections of heat with other things, which had been previously ignored. Thus his acts in relation to these things get more meaning; he knows better what he is doing or "is about" when he has to do with them; he can intend consequences instead of just letting them happen - all synonymous ways of saying the same thing. At the same stroke, the flame has gained in meaning; all that is known about combustion, oxidation, about light and temperature, may become an intrinsic part of its intellectual content.

(2) The other side of an educative experience is an added power of subsequent direction or control. To say that one knows what he is about, or can intend certain consequences, is to say, of course, that he can better anticipate what is going to happen; that he can, therefore, get ready or prepare in advance so as to secure beneficial consequences and avert undesirable ones. A genuinely educative experience, then, one in which instruction is conveyed and ability increased, is contradistinguished from a routine activity on one hand, and a capricious activity on the other. (a) In the latter one "does not care what happens"; one just lets himself go and avoids connecting the consequences of one's act (the evidences of its connections with other things) with the act. It is customary to frown upon such aimless random activity, treating it as willful mischief or carelessness or lawlessness. But there is a tendency to seek the cause of such aimless activities in the youth's own disposition, isolated from everything else. But in fact such activity is explosive, and due to maladjustment with surroundings. Individuals act capriciously whenever they act under external dictation, or from being told, without having a purpose of their own or perceiving the bearing of the deed upon other acts. One may learn by doing something which he does not understand; even in the most intelligent action, we do much which we do not mean, because the largest portion of the connections of the act we

consciously intend are not perceived or anticipated. But we learn only because after the act is performed we note results which we had not noted before. But much work in school consists in setting up rules by which pupils are to act of such a sort that even after pupils have acted, they are not led to see the connection between the result - say the answer - and the method pursued. So far as they are concerned, the whole thing is a trick and a kind of miracle. Such action is essentially capricious, and leads to capricious habits. (b) Routine action, action which is automatic, may increase skill to do a particular thing. In so far, it might be said to have an educative effect. But it does not lead to new perceptions of bearings and connections; it limits rather than widens the meaning-horizon. And since the environment changes and our way of acting has to be modified in order successfully to keep a balanced connection with things, an isolated uniform way of acting becomes disastrous at some critical moment. The vaunted "skill" turns out gross ineptitude.

The essential contrast of the idea of education as continuous reconstruction with the other one-sided conceptions which have been criticized in this and the previous chapter is that it identifies the end (the result) and the process. This is verbally self-contradictory, but only verbally. It means that experience as an active process occupies time and that its later period completes its earlier portion; it brings to light connections involved, but hitherto unperceived. The later outcome thus reveals the meaning of the earlier, while the experience as a whole establishes a bent or disposition toward the things possessing this meaning. Every such continuous experience or activity is educative, and all education resides in having such experiences.

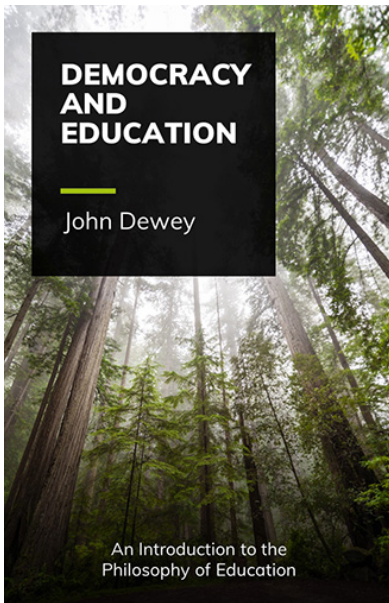
It remains only to point out (what will receive more ample attention later) that the reconstruction of experience may be social as well as personal. For purposes of simplification we have spoken in the earlier chapters somewhat as if the education of the immature which fills them with the spirit of the social group to which they belong, were a sort of catching up of the child with the aptitudes and resources of the

adult group. In static societies, societies which make the maintenance of established custom their measure of value, this conception applies in the main. But not in progressive communities. They endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own. Men have long had some intimation of the extent to which education may be consciously used to eliminate obvious social evils through starting the young on paths which shall not produce these ills, and some idea of the extent in which education may be made an instrument of realizing the better hopes of men. But we are doubtless far from realizing the potential efficacy of education as a constructive agency of improving society, from realizing that it represents not only a development of children and youth but also of the future society of which they will be the constituents.

## Summary

Education may be conceived either retrospectively or prospectively. That is to say, it may be treated as process of accommodating the future to the past, or as an utilization of the past for a resource in a developing future. The former finds its standards and patterns in what has gone before. The mind may be regarded as a group of contents resulting from having certain things presented. In this case, the earlier presentations constitute the material to which the later are to be assimilated. Emphasis upon the value of the early experiences of immature beings is most important, especially because of the tendency to regard them as of little account. But these experiences do not consist of externally presented material, but of interaction of native activities with the environment which progressively modifies both the activities and the environment. The defect of the Herbartian theory of formation through presentations consists in slighting this constant interaction and change. The same principle of criticism applies to theories which find the primary subject matter of study in

the cultural products - especially the literary products - of man's history. Isolated from their connection with the present environment in which individuals have to act, they become a kind of rival and distracting environment. Their value lies in their use to increase the meaning of the things with which we have actively to do at the present time. The idea of education advanced in these chapters is formally summed up in the idea of continuous reconstruction of experience, an idea which is marked off from education as preparation for a remote future, as unfolding, as external formation, and as recapitulation of the past.



Dewey, J. (2018). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (1st ed.)*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracyandeducation>