

How to Educate a Gentleman?

Selections from

John Locke

In this section Locke lays out several of his thoughts on the best way to educate a young gentleman. He speaks primarily of how a tutor should act toward a young pupil. Much of his attention is focused on how avoiding physical punishment and helping students develop their own motivation.

A sound mind in a sound body, is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world: He that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little better for anything else. Men's happiness or misery is most part of their own making. He, whose mind directs not wisely, will never take the right way; and he, whose body is crazy and feeble, will never be able to advance in it. I confess, there are some men's constitutions of body and mind so vigorous, and well framed by nature, that they need not much assistance from others, but by the strength of their natural genius, they are from their cradles carried towards what is excellent; and by the privilege of their happy constitutions are able to do wonders: but examples of this kind are but few, and I think I may say, that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. 'Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind: the little, and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies, have very important and lasting consequences: and there 'tis, as in the fountains of some rivers, where a gentle application of the hand turns the flexible waters into channels, that make them quite contrary courses, and by this little direction given them at first in the source, they receive different tendencies and arrive at last, at very remote and distant places.

Reflection Question

Locke seems to be committing himself to societal determinism. Is this consistent with his other philosophical works?

1.[Phyiscal] punishment contributes not at all to the mastery of our natural propensity to indulge corporal and present pleasure, and to avoid pain at any rate, but rather encourages it; and so strengthens that in us, which is the root of all vicious and wrong actions. For what motives, I pray, does a child act by, but of such pleasure and pain, that drudges at his book against his inclination, or abstains from eating unwholesome fruit, that he takes pleasure in, only out of fear of whipping? He in this only prefers the greater corporal pleasure, or avoids the greater corporal pain; and what is it, to govern his actions, and direct his conduct, by such motives as these? What is it, I say, but to cherish that principle in him, which it is our business to root out and destroy? And therefore I cannot think any correction useful to a child, where the shame of suffering for having, done amiss does not work more upon him than the pain.

33. As the strength of the body lies chiefly able to endure hardships, so also does that of the mind. And the great principle and foundation of all virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to deny himself his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way.

Reflection Question

What kind of ethical framework undergirds Locke's views of value and worth?

49. This sort of correction naturally breeds an aversion to that which it is the tutor's business to create a liking to. How obvious is it to observe, that children come to hate things liked at first, as soon as they come to be whipped, or chid, and teased about them? And it is not to be wondered at in them, when grown men would not be able to be reconciled to any thing by such ways. Who is there that would not be disgusted with any innocent recreation in itself indifferent to him, if he should with blows, or ill language, be hale to it, when he had no mind? Or be constantly so treated, for some circumstance in his application to it? This is natural to be so. Offensive circumstances ordinarily infect innocent things which they are joined with: and the very sight of a cup, wherein any one uses to take nauseous physic, turns his stomach, so that nothing will relish well out of it, though the cup be never so clean and well-shaped, and of the richest materials.

50. Such a sort of slavish discipline makes a slavish temper. The child submits, and dissembles obedience, whilst the fear of the rod hangs over him; but when that is removed, and, by being out of sight, he can promise himself impunity, he gives the greater scope to his natural inclination, which by this way is not at all altered, but on the contrary heightened and increased in him; and after such restraint, breaks out usually with the more violence. or,

51 4. If severity carried to the highest pitch does prevail, and works a cure upon the present unruly distemper, it is often bringing in the room of it a worse and more dangerous disease, by breaking the mind; and then, in the place of disorderly young fellow, you have a low-spirited, moped creature: who, however with his unnatural sobriety he may please silly people, who commend tame, unactive children because they make no noise, nor give them any trouble; yet, at last, will probably prove as uncomfortable a thing to his friends, as he will be, all his life, an useless thing to himself and others.

52 Beating them, and all other sorts of slavish and corporal punishments, are not the discipline fit to be used in the education of those we would have wise, good, and ingenuous men; and therefore very rarely to be applied, and that only in great occasions, and cases of extremity. On the other side, to flatter children by rewards of things that are pleasant to them, is as carefully to be avoided. He that will give to his son apples, or sugar-plums, or what else of this kind he is most delighted with, to make him learn his book, does but authorize his love of pleasure, and cocker up that dangerous propensity, which he ought by all means to subdue and stifle in him. You can never hope to teach him to master it whilst you compound for the check you give his inclination in one place, by the satisfaction you propose to it in another

Reflection Question

What about this course of action is wrong for Locke? Is it inconsistency, inefficiency, or something else entirely?

To make a good, a wise, and a virtuous man, it is fit he should learn to cross his appetite, and deny his inclination to riches, finery, or pleasing his palate, etc., whenever his reason advises the contrary, and his duty requires it. But when

you draw him to do anything that is fit, by the offer of money or reward the pains of learning his book, by the pleasure of a luscious morsel; when you promise him a lace-cravat, or a fine new suit, upon performance of some of his little tasks; what do you, by proposing these as rewards, but allow them to be the good things he should aim at, and thereby encourage his longing for them, and accustom him to place his happiness in them? Thus people, to prevail with children to be industrious about their grammar, dancing, or some other such matter of no great moment to the happiness or usefulness of their lives by misapplied rewards and punishments, sacrifice their virtue, invert the order of their education, and teach them luxury, pride, or covetousness, etc. For in this way, flattering those wrong inclinations, which they should restrain and suppress, they lay the foundations of those future vices, which cannot be avoided, but by curbing our desires, and accustoming them early to submit to reason.

53. I say, not this, that I would have children kept from the conveniences or pleasures of life, that are not injurious to their health or virtue. On the contrary, I would have their lives made as pleasant, and as agreeable to them as may be, in a plentiful enjoyment of whatsoever might innocently delight them: provided it be with this caution, that they have those enjoyments only as the consequences of the state of esteem and acceptance they are in with their parents and governors; but they should never be offered or bestowed on them, as the reward of this or that particularly performance, that they show an aversion to, or to which they would not have applied themselves without that temptation.

54. But if you take away the rod on one hand, and these little encouragements, which they are taken with, on the other, How then (will you say) shall children be governed? Remove hope and fear, and there is an end of all discipline. I grant, that good and evil, reward and punishment, are the only motives to a rational creature; these are the spur and reins whereby all mankind are set on work and guided, and therefore they are to be made use of to children too. For I advise their parents and governors always to carry this in their minds, that they are to be treated as rational creatures.

55. I grant, and punishments must be proposed to children, if we intend to work upon them. The mistake, I imagine, is that those that are generally made use of, are ill chosen. The pains and pleasures of the body are, I think, of ill consequence, when made the rewards and punishments, whereby men would prevail on their children: for they serve but to increase and strengthen those appetites which 'tis our business to subdue and master. What principle of virtue do you lay in a child, if you will redeem his desires of one pleasure by the proposal of another? This is but to enlarge his appetite, and instruct it to wander. If a child cries for an unwholesome and dangerous fruit, you purchase his quiet by giving him a less hurtful sweetmeat; this perhaps may preserve his health, but spoils his mind, and sets that farther out of order. For here you only change the object, but flatter still his appetite, and allow that must be satisfied: wherein, as I have showed, lies the root of the mischief: and till you bring him to be able to bear a denial of that satisfaction, the child may at present be quiet and orderly, but the disease is not cured. By this way of proceeding you foment and cherish in him, that which is the spring from whence all the evil flows, which will be sure on the next occasion to break out again with more violence, give him stronger longings, and you more trouble.

65. ...Let therefore your rules to your son be as few as is possible, and rather fewer than more than seem absolutely necessary. For if you burden him with many rules, one of these two things must necessarily follow; that either he must be very often punished, which will be of ill consequence, by making punishment too frequent and familiar; or else you must let the transgressions of some of your rules go unpunished, whereby they will of course grow contemptible, and your authority become cheap to him. Make but few laws, but see they be well observed, when once made. Few years require but few laws; and as his age increases when one rule is by practice well established, you may add another.

70 ...What shall I do with my son? If I keep him always at home, he will be in danger to be my young master; and if I send him abroad, how is it possible to keep him from the contagion of rudeness and vice, which is so every where in fashion? In my house, he will perhaps be more innocent, but more ignorant, too, of the world, and being used constantly to the same faces, and little company will, when he comes abroad, be a sheepish or conceited creature... Virtue is harder to be got than a knowledge of the world; and if lost in a young man, is seldom recovered... A young man, before he leaves the shelter of his father's house, and the guard of a tutor, should be fortified with resolution, and made acquainted with men, to secure his virtue; lest he should be led into some ruinous course, or fatal precipice, before he is sufficiently acquainted with the dangers of conversation, and has steadiness enough not to yield to every temptation... But how any one's being put into a mixed herd of unruly boys, and then learning to wrangle at trap, or rook at span-farthing, fits him

for civil conversation or business I do not see... I am sure, he who is able to be at the charge of a tutor at home, may there give his son a more genteel carriage, more manly thoughts, and a sense of what is worthy and becoming, with a greater proficiency in learning into the bargain, and ripen him up sooner into a man, than any at school can do... And if a young gentleman, bred at home, be not taught more of them than he could learn at school, his father has made a very ill choice of a tutor. Take a boy from the top of a grammar-school, and one of the same age, bred as he should be in his father's family, and bring them into good company together; and then see which of the two will have the more manly carriage, and address himself with the more becoming assurance to strangers....Vice, if we may believe the general complaint, ripens so fast now-a-days, and runs up to seed so early in young people, that it is impossible to keep a lad from the spreading contagion, if you will venture him abroad in the herd, and trust to chance, or his own inclination, for the choice of his company at school... It is virtue then, direct virtue, which is the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in education... And therefore I cannot but prefer breeding of a young gentleman at home in his father's sight, under a good governor, as much the best and safest way to this great and main end of education, when it can be had, and is ordered as it should be... This I am sure, a father that breeds his son at home, has the opportunity to have him more in his own company, and there give him what encouragement he thinks fit; and can keep him better from the taint of servants, and the meaner sort of people, than is possible to be done abroad. But what shall be resolved in the case, must in great measure be left to the parents...

73. None of the things they are to learn should ever be made a burden to them, or imposed on them as a task. Whatever is so proposed, presently becomes irksome: the mind takes an aversion to it, though before it were a thing of delight or indifference. Let a child be but ordered to whip his top at a certain time every day, whether he has, or has not a mind to it; let this be but required of him as a duty, wherein he must spend so many hours morning and afternoon, and see whether he will not soon be weary of any play at this rate. Is it not so with grown men? What they do cheerfully of themselves, do they not presently grow sick of, and can no more endure, as soon as they find it is expected of them as a duty? Children have as much a mind to show that they are free, that their own good actions come from themselves, that they are absolute and independent, as any of the proudest of you grown men, think of them as you please.

Reflection Question

Is Locke right about the nature of tasks? If so, what implications would it have for the kinds of demands humans can make on each other?

102. Begin therefore betimes nicely to observe your son's temper, and that, when he is under least restraint. See what are his predominant passions and prevailing inclinations; whether he be fierce or mild, bold or bashful, compassionate or cruel, open or reserved, etc. For as these are different in him, so are your methods to be different, and your authority must hence take measures to apply it self [in] different ways to him. These native propensities, these prevalences of constitution, are not to be cured by rules, or a direct contest, especially those of them that are the humbler and meaner sort, which proceed from fear and lowness of spirit; though with art they may be much mended, and turned to good purposes. But of this be sure, after all is done, the bias will always hang on that side that nature first placed it: and, if you carefully observe the characters of his mind now in the first scenes of his life, you will ever after be able to judge which way his thoughts lean, and what he aims at even hereafter, when, as he grows up, the plot thickens, and he puts on several shapes to act it.

118 Curiosity in children (which I had occasion just to mention, section 108) is but an appetite after knowledge, and therefore ought to be encouraged in them, not only as a good sign, but as the great instrument nature has provided to remove that ignorance they were born with, and which, without this busy inquisitiveness, will make them dull and useless creatures. The ways to encourage it, and keep it active and vigorous, are, I suppose, these following: 1. Not to check or discountenance any inquiries he shall make, nor suffer them to be laughed at; but to answer all his questions,

and explain the matters he desires to know, so as to make them as much intelligible to him. as suits the capacity of his age and knowledge... Mark what 'tis his mind aims at in the question, and not what words he expresses it in... For knowledge to the understanding is acceptable as light to the eyes: and children are please and delighted with it exceedingly, especially if they see that their inquiries are regarded, and that their desire of knowing is encouraged and commended. And I doubt not, but one great reason why many children abandon themselves wholly to silly sports; and trifle away all their time in trifling, is, because they have found their curiosity balked, and their inquiries neglected...

167. ...In teaching of children this too, I think, it is to be observed, that in most cases, where they stick, they are apt to be farther puzzled, by putting them upon finding it out themselves... Therefore, wherever they are at a stand, and are willing to go forward, help them presently over the difficulty, without any rebuke or chiding; remembering, that where harsher ways are taken, they are the effect only of pride and peevishness in the teacher, who expects children should instantly be masters of as much as he knows: whereas he should rather consider that his business is to settle in them habits, not angrily to inculcate rules, which serve for little in the conduct of our lives; at least are of no use to children, who forget them as soon as given. ...The great use and skill of a teacher is to make all as easy as he can....Passionate words or blows from the tutor, fill the child's mind with terror and affrightment, which immediately takes it wholly up, and leaves no room for other impressions....

180. ...But in this, as in all other parts of instruction, great care must be taken with children, to begin with that which is plain and simple, and to teach them as little as can be at once, and settle that well in their heads, before you proceed to the next, or anything new in that science.

Give them first one simple idea, and see that they take it right, and perfectly comprehend it, before you go any farther; and then add some other simple idea, which lies next in your way to what you aim it; and so proceeding by gentle and insensible steps, children, without confusion and amazement, will have their understandings opened, and their thoughts extended, farther than could have been expected. And when any one has learned any thing himself, there is no such way to fix it in his memory, and to encourage him to go on as to set him to teach it others.

Reflection Question

What are Locke's principal views about the ends and means of education?

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