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## JOHN LOCKE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATION

This paper aims to call attention to a new interpretation of John Locke's views on education, by emphasizing the fact that his educational writings, like his philosophical contributions, characterize him essentially as a pioneer in certain aspects in this field of work. The following points will be discussed successively: His life and education; his position as a philosopher, psychologist, and educator; his emphasis on "native propensities" and periods of child development; his opposition to formal discipline; and his views on the relation of teacher and pupil, the dynamic side of child life, and the aim of discipline.

In order to understand Locke, it is necessary to realize that his aims and methods were largely determined by the place and time in which he lived and by the schools which he attended. His early life was spent at home in the country, where he was taught by his father; this fact explains in part why he favored the tutorial form of education. The old stone farmhouse at Pennsford, Somersetshire, where he lived from 1632 to 1646, may still be visited. The older section of the house is rapidly going to decay and when the writer made inquiries regarding its location,—from a blacksmith who has lived for ten years within a stone's throw of the old homestead,—the reply was, "I do not know the gentleman," and, when informed that Locke died nearly three hundred years ago, the answer varied little,—"I never 'erd of the gentleman." Fortunately, however, conditions are quite different at Westminster School and at Christ Church College, where are found paintings, statues, coats-of-arms, and memorial windows in honor of the "pious John Locke", who is considered their "most famous student."

At fourteen Locke entered Westminster School in London, where he was associated with Dryden, South, and the renowned Dr. Buzby, the headmaster. Dr. Buzby 'taught his school' across the street from Westminster Hall during a large part of the reign of Charles I, the Commonwealth period, the reign of Charles II, James II, and nine years of the reign of William and Mary, being headmaster of the school for fifty-seven years. He

it was who said, "The rod is my sieve and the boy who cannot pass through, is no boy for me."<sup>1</sup> This also was the master who refused to take off his hat when the king visited the school, for fear the boys might think there was a greater man in the kingdom than Richard Buzby,—the great schoolmaster who 'kept his school' in spite of a revolution, the execution of his king, "the threatenings of a great fire and the ravages of a cruel plague"; a stern teacher, respected but always disliked by his sensitive pupil, who ever after denounced many of his methods.

It is held by many authorities that Locke was among the schoolboys who saw the execution of Charles I in front of Whitehall. Of this we are not sure, but we know that his father was a colonel in the Parliamentary army; that his life was spent in a period of civil and religious fermentation in England; and that the rigid discipline and confining life of the school affected his delicate health and sensitive nature so that he ever after opposed<sup>2</sup> the so-called Public Schools of his time, and subsequently aided in modifying their methods of teaching and discipline.

When Locke left Westminster and entered Oxford, he found he was not in sympathy with the predominant classical course of study or the prevailing methods of instruction. He continued his study for several years, however, and received the degrees of A.B., A.M., and M.D.; later he was expelled. The order from Charles II, dated Whitehall, 11th day of November, 1684, may be seen in the library of Christ Church College. It is signed by the Earl of Sunderland, and reads:—

"Whereas we have received information of the factious and disloyal behavior of . . . Locke, one of the students of that college, we have thought fit to signify our will and pleasure to you, that you forthwith remove him from his said student's place and deprive him of all the rights and advantages thereto belonging."

Locke then began to travel, and his long period of preparation culminated in productive literary work after he was fifty-seven

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<sup>1</sup>The Deanery Guide to Westminster Abbey, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>Some Thoughts Concerning Education (Quick Ed.), pp. 74, 138, 150-3.

years of age. He died at Oates, in 1704, at the age of seventy-two.

It is known that Locke read with care the educational writings of Montaigne, but that he was practically unacquainted with Ascham, Mulcaster, Ratich, or Comenius, and had paid little attention to the great writers of Greece and Rome. His work was, in the main, the result of his own observations and reflections, for Locke was a pioneer,—a pioneer in philosophy, in that he founded the predominating empiricism of England, and, as has frequently been pointed out, laid the foundation for the idealism of Berkeley, the skepticism of Hume, the sensationalism of Condillac, and the criticism of Kant; a pioneer in psychology, in that he destroyed the faculty psychology of Aristotle and established on a substantial basis the introspective method of to-day; a pioneer in education, in that he opposed the scholastic method and harsh discipline of the schools, favored an all-round, wholesome, common-sense education, and paved the way for modern child-psychology. His educational writings also served as a corrective to the bias of his time by laying emphasis on the sympathetic relationship between the teacher and pupil and on the dynamic side of child life.

In Locke's writings on education, psychology, and philosophy we find him preëminently critical and a true example of the practical Englishman, dealing vigorously, directly, and carefully with whatever object he wishes to analyze, but still positive rather than negative in his conclusions. The English philosophers confined themselves to the study of the human mind and society from an empirical point of view. Locke was a typical English philosopher. He was prosaic and practical, treating his problems in a common-sense manner; he analyzed rather than synthesized,—described rather than explained. His chief mental virtues were sincerity and simplicity, and he was so devoted to the truth that on one occasion he declared, "Whatever I write, as soon as I discover it not to be true, my hand shall be the forwardest to throw it into the fire."

The object, or purpose, of Locke's inquiries was to study the nature of his own mind, to determine the power of the individual and to destroy the scholastic method. His *Essay Con-*

*cerning the Human Understanding*, he asserts, is a copy of his own mind, and his method the plain "historical",<sup>3</sup> or as we would speak of it, the psychological method. Professor R. B. Perry of Harvard<sup>4</sup> has shown, however, that he blends and frequently confuses the logical, epistemological, and psychological view-points.

Locke destroyed the Aristotelian "faculty psychology", established the introspective method, and, with Descartes, laid the foundation of modern rationalistic psychology, thus shifting the basis for educational theory. Professor James, his greatest disciple, goes so far as to maintain that there has been little new psychology since Locke; although it has progressed wonderfully in refining its methods of study and in broadening its scope!<sup>5</sup>

In attempting to combat Descartes' theory of innate ideas, Locke apparently takes the opposite extreme in his philosophy and holds that knowledge is entirely the product of experience, for the mind at birth is an "empty tablet".<sup>6</sup> Descartes never gave a very clear definition of "innate ideas", but Locke regarded the idea as an object of consciousness, or, as he states it, "Whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks."<sup>7</sup> In his philosophical writings he emphasizes the external evocation of the idea; that is, the relation of ideas to the objects from which they have arisen, the epistemological point of view. In his educational writings, on the other hand, he is continually referring to native tendencies to action. Thus his educational theory, contrary to what his interpreters have been emphasizing, takes into consideration the fact that there are "natural tendencies implanted in the minds of men."<sup>8</sup>

This may be illustrated by a number of quotations, but the following will give his general point of view. When speaking of the education of children, Locke, as an educator, says:—

"We must not hope wholly to change their original tempers. . . . God has stamped certain characters upon men's

<sup>3</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Bohn Ed.), p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> *The Approach to Philosophy*, p. 273.      <sup>5</sup> *Talks to Teachers*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. I.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158.

minds, which, like their shapes, may perhaps be a little mended, but can hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary”;

and further,—

“He, therefore, that is about children should well study their natures and aptitudes, and see by often trials what turns they easily take and what becomes them”;

and further,—

“For in many cases all we can do or should aim at, is to make the best of what nature has given, to prevent the vices and faults to which such a constitution is most inclined, and give it all the advantages it is capable of. Every one’s natural genius should be carried as far as it could, but to attempt the putting another upon him will be but labor in vain, and what is so plastered on will at best sit untowardly, and have always hanging to it the ungracefulness of constraint and affectation.”<sup>9</sup>

“Native propensities,”<sup>10</sup> he says, ‘should be watched from the beginning, in order to discover the individual’s capacity for knowledge,’ for “amongst men of equal education there are great inequalities of parts.”<sup>11</sup> These quotations indicate that Locke does not tack education on to life as is commonly asserted, but makes it dependent on the interest, disposition, temperament, and the development of the individual from within.

It further becomes apparent from many of his scattered but valuable thoughts on the observation of children, and his suggestions tending toward a study of mental development and self-activity, that there originated with Locke a psychological tendency in education, which was later to be developed by Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Herbart, evolving into the present predominating psychological and biological view-points in education, of which the child is the centre of orientation. Locke advocated that parents and tutors should “study children’s natures and aptitudes”,<sup>12</sup> “their native propensities”,<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Some Thoughts Concerning Education, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>11</sup>On the Conduct of the Understanding (Bohn Ed.), p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>Some Thoughts Concerning Education, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 83.

“their prevailing inclinations”,<sup>14</sup> “their several conditions”, because acquired habits may be conditioned by these native propensities. A study of mental development, though crude and inaccurate, is suggested by this and by what follows, for he writes:—

“Never trouble yourselves about those faults in them [children] which you know age will cure”;<sup>15</sup>

and again,—

“And if you carefully observe the characters of his [the child's] 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.”<sup>16</sup>

This writer perhaps knew nothing of instincts, but he said, to quote indirectly, ‘Observe carefully for favorable seasons of aptitude and inclination’<sup>17</sup> and ‘teach the child when he is in tune.’<sup>18</sup> This is similar to Professor James's advice to “Strike the iron while it is hot”, and to the present-day educational vernacular to “appeal to the instincts when they are ripe.”

Habit, it is true, is continually emphasized by Locke and it is on this account that Professor Paul Monroe in his *History of Education* has excluded him from the usual classification as a naturalist, a realist, or a humanist and posited him as a typical representative of the disciplinary education. Monroe emphatically states:—

“The one fundamental thing that makes Locke a representative of the disciplinary education throughout is his idea of the human mind as a blank to begin with, that it has virtues and powers worked into it from the outside through its formation of habits. In respect to many other important points, as will be seen, Locke agrees with the naturalists who, opposing Locke on this point, held that all such powers came as the development of powers within, according to a wholly natural process. Development, according to Locke, came only through the formation of habit through discipline.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Some Thoughts Concerning Education, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Text Book in the History of Education, p. 513.

Professor Monroe does not give credit for Locke's emphasis on the development of the "different temperaments", "natural aptitudes", and "natural inclinations" of the pupil, and does not recognize the fact that 'habits' are always limited in their application to education and character. Locke was not speaking of habit in general but of particular habits. It is hardly fair to try to posit him as a typical representative of the "Disciplinary Education" of his period, for Professor Monroe defines this disciplinary education, of which he makes Locke the chief exponent, as follows:—

"A particular activity of experience, especially of an intellectual character, if well selected, produces a power or ability out of all proportion to the expenditure of energy therein; a power that will be serviceable in most dissimilar experiences or activities, that will be available in every situation, that will be applicable to the solution of problems presented by any subject, however remote in kind from the one furnishing the occasion for the original disciplinary experience."<sup>20</sup>

It seems highly improbable that Locke ever held this view. Although he once said that mathematics should be taught all in order to make them (children) reasonable creatures,<sup>21</sup> he approached modern psychological insight into the study of the transference of mental ability when he said:—

"But the learning pages of Latin by heart no more fits the memory for retention of anything else, than the graving of one sentence in lead makes it the more capable of retaining any other characters."<sup>22</sup>

He further states,—

"If men are for a long time accustomed only to one sort or method of thoughts, their minds grow stiff in it, and do not readily turn to another. It is, therefore, to give them this freedom, that I think they should be made to look into all sorts of knowledge, and exercise their understanding in so wide a variety and stock of knowledge. But I do not

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<sup>20</sup> Text Book in the History of Education, p. 508.

<sup>21</sup> On the Conduct of the Understanding, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Some Thoughts Concerning Education, p. 154.



propose it as a variety and stock of knowledge, but a variety and freedom of thinking, as an increase of the powers and activity of the mind, not as an enlargement of its possessions."<sup>23</sup>

It is also apparent that Professor James's view of native retentiveness in memory, which has so far successfully withstood so many attacks, was anticipated by Locke when he said :—

“But I fear this faculty of the mind [memory] is not capable of much help and amendment in general by any exercise or endeavor of ours, at least not by that used upon this pretence in Grammar Schools.”<sup>24</sup>\*

Locke goes further and anticipates what we might consider the distinctly American point of view in regard to the relation between teacher and pupil. His advice here is excellent and its significance in England is to-day keenly realized. The essential attitude of parent and teacher is not only that of a critic and disciplinarian, but, also underneath it all, that of a friend :—

“But whatever he [the child] consults you about, unless it lead to some fatal irremediable mischief, be sure you advise only as a friend of more experience, but with your advice mingle nothing of command and authority, nor more than you would to your equal or a stranger.”<sup>25</sup>

Seek the children's friendship, for all young people are glad of sure friends, he implies.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the Conduct of the Understanding, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

\* Since this article was accepted for publication by the *Sewanee Review*, my attention has been called to a doctor's dissertation by Frederick Arthur Hodge on “John Locke and Formal Discipline.” (Published by the author, Winthrop Normal and Industrial College, S. C.) Dr. Hodge's point of view is similar to that outlined in this article, and I hasten to insert his conclusions in the proof-sheet. He says :—

“That the evidence adduced tends to show : First, that Locke's philosophy and psychology furnish no basis for the dogma in question. Second, that he sought to set aside the limited curriculum based upon the disciplinary conception of his time, and substitute for it a broader curriculum. Third, that he urged the abolition of abstract rules and generalizations in favor of concrete specific experiences. Fourth, that Locke's various references to education as a discipline may best be interpreted in the light of *specific disciplines* and *concepts of method*, and such interpretation is consistent with his philosophy.”

Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education* had gone through three editions between 1693-5 and it must have helped to arouse public opinion, for in 1698 an Act was asked for in Parliament "to remedy the foul abuse of children at schools, especially in the great schools of the nation."<sup>27</sup> This Act was not passed, and Locke's influence was long delayed in its effect. Over a century and a half later Spencer said, "The discipline in these schools is worse than that of adult life—much more unjust, cruel, brutal."<sup>28</sup> He then calls attention with approval to Locke's statement, "Great severity of punishment does but little good, nay, great harm, in education, and I believe it will be found that, *cæteris paribus*, those children who have been most chastised seldom make the best men."<sup>29</sup>

The dynamic side of child life was frequently emphasized by Locke and has occupied a very prominent place in the best educational writings of the past few years. "Children are naturally active and less apt to be idle than men,"<sup>30</sup> said our philosopher, who had caught indirectly the spirit of Plato and had anticipated Froebel, when he wrote to his friend, William Molyneus, August 23, 1693:—

"I am so much for recreation that I would, as much as possible, have all they [children] do be made so; I am for full liberty of diversion as much as you can be, and, upon a second perusal of my book, I do not doubt you will find me so."<sup>31</sup>

In the book which has been interpreted as advocating the form of rigid disciplinary educational point of view of the seventeenth century, Locke writes that children enjoy play,—

"And it is that liberty alone, which gives the true relish and delight to their ordinary play game";<sup>32</sup>

and again,—

"I have always had a fancy that learning might be made a play and recreation to children",<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> W. C. Hazlitt, *Schools, School-books and School-masters*, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 219.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12th ed., Eng., 1854, Vol. VIII, p. 323.

<sup>32</sup> *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129.

and, therefore, we should smooth their (children's) way and help them readily forward.<sup>34</sup> There should be directed play,<sup>35</sup> and—

“The chief art [of the educator] is to make all that they [children] have to do sport and play, too.”<sup>36</sup>

These passages show that Locke opposes the educational bias of his time, as is also clear from the following definite statement:—

“Children love liberty, and therefore they should be brought to do the things that are fit for them without feeling any restraint laid upon them.”<sup>37</sup> “That which parents should take care of here is to distinguish between the wants of fancy and those of nature”;<sup>38</sup> “Children should not have anything like work or serious[ness] laid upon them; neither their minds nor bodies will bear it.”<sup>39</sup>

To be sure, these are more or less isolated quotations, but is this typical of the disciplinary education of the seventeenth century?

The *Thoughts Concerning Education* is full of stimulating ideas on the ultimate aim of education, methods of teaching, personal hygiene, the aims of good discipline, the kinds, uses, and limitations of punishments, and on trenchant criticisms of the educational practices of the time in which Locke lived, especially in his emphasis on a “sound mind in a sound body.” His aims in discipline are so good, and his view-point so clear, that two short quotations will be adequate to explain his theory:—

“He that has found a way how to keep up a child's spirit easy, active, and free, and yet at the same time to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions, has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education.”<sup>40</sup>

Patterns are to be followed more than good rules, for children do much by imitation, since,—

“We are all a sort of chameleons that still take a tincture from things near us.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Some Thoughts Concerning Education, p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

Though Locke's educational writings have been neglected by many educators, Leibnitz considered the *Thoughts* superior to the *Essays*,<sup>42</sup> and Horace Mann said as early as 1850, when discussing important sources in education, "It would be unpardonable to pass by that admirable treatise, Locke's *Thoughts on Education*. . . . This excellent treatise, which is by far better than anything which had ever been written, has been almost wholly neglected and forgotten."<sup>43</sup>

Space will not permit at this time a review of the numerous mistakes and omissions in Locke's educational work, but suffice it to mention that in his comprehensive course of study in which he advances modern ideas on object teaching, manual training, trade schools, and school gardening, he neglects the cultural subjects of art and music.

Sources in educational tendencies are interesting and instructive, and for a study of the beginning of modern ideas in education, one cannot find a more fertile field than the writings of John Locke; the pioneer who built better than he knew, but whose merits lay in conceiving rather than in carrying to completion the conceptions which he formulated. He was not a teacher, though his educational writings are preëminently practical; his influence was most marked in directing the line of thought of the great writers who followed him and in shaping popular opinion, rather than in helping the schoolmen of his period. He was a pioneer who cleared the field in order that others might cultivate.

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<sup>42</sup> Cited by Compayre, *History of Pedagogy* (Payne Ed.), p. 196.

<sup>43</sup> *Life and Works of Horace Mann*, Mary Mann, II, p. 225.