

An Essay Towards A Philosophy of Education

A LIBERAL EDUCATION FOR ALL

BY
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Foreword

OUR forefathers trusted of yore to the rod and to coercion for the evoking in children of a love of learning. For the last fifty years we have rested our hopes on the enthusiasm of the teachers. But that enthusiasm, when not fictitious, often acts prejudicially by diverting the child's love of knowledge and new ideas into admiration for his teacher: and when that fails, as it frequently does, nothing is left, except extraneous and baneful appeals to self-interest.

Miss Mason saw and in this volume has explained that the natural and only quite wholesome way of teaching is to let the child's desire for knowledge operate in the schoolboy and guide the teacher. This means that without foregoing discipline, nor cutting ourselves off from tradition, we must continue experiments already being started in our elementary schools. These are based on the chastening fact that children learn best before we adults begin to teach them at all: and hence that however uncongenial the task may be, we must conform our teaching methods to those of Nature. The attempt has often been made before. But in this volume there is a rare combination of intuitive insight and practical sagacity. The author refused to believe that the collapse of the desire for knowledge between seven and seventeen years of age is inevitable. So must we.

EDWARD LYTTTELTON, D.D.

Preface

It would seem a far cry from *Undine* to a ' liberal education ' but there is a point of contact between the two ; a soul awoke within a water-sprite at the touch of love ; so, I have to tell of the awakening of a ' general soul ' at the touch of knowledge. Eight¹ years ago the ' soul ' of a class of children in a mining village school awoke simultaneously at this magic touch and has remained awake. We know that religion can awaken souls, that love makes a new man, that the call of a vocation may do it, and in the age of the Renaissance, men's souls, the general soul, awoke to knowledge : but this appeal rarely reaches the modern soul ; and, notwithstanding the pleasantness attending lessons and marks in all our schools, I believe the ardour for knowledge in the children of this mining village is a phenomenon that indicates new possibilities. Already many thousands of the children of the Empire had experienced this intellectual conversion, but they were the children of educated persons. To find that the children of a mining population were equally responsive seemed to open a new hope for the world. It may be that the souls of all children are waiting for the call of knowledge to awaken them to delightful living.

This is how the late Mrs. Francis Steinthal, who was the happy instigator of the movement in Council Schools, wrote,—“ Think of the meaning of this in the lives of the children,—disciplined lives, and no lawless strikes, justice, an end to class warfare, developed intellects, and

¹ Now ten.

no market for trashy and corrupt literature ! We shall, or rather they will, live in a redeemed world." This was written in a moment of enthusiasm on hearing that a certain County Council had accepted a scheme of work for this pioneer school ; enthusiasm sees in advance the fields white to the harvest, but indeed the event is likely to justify high expectations. Though less than nine years have passed since that pioneer school made the bold attempt, already many thousands of children working under numerous County Councils are finding that "Studies serve for delight."

No doubt children are well taught and happy in their lessons as things are, and this was specially true of the school in question ; yet both teachers and children find an immeasurable difference between the casual interest roused by marks, pleasing oral lessons and other school devices, and the sort of steady avidity for knowledge that comes with the awakened soul. The children have converted the school inspectors : "And the English !" said one of these in astonishment as he listened to their long, graphic, dramatic narrations of what they had heard. During the last thirty years we (including many fellow workers) have had thousands of children, in our schoolrooms, home and other, working on the lines of Dean Colet's prayer for St. Paul's School,— "Pray for the children to prosper in good life and good literature ;" probably all children so taught grow up with such principles and pursuits as make for happy and useful citizenship.

I should like to add that we have no axe to grind. The public good is our aim ; and the methods proposed are applicable in any school. My object in offering this volume to the public is to urge upon all who are concerned with education a few salient principles which are generally either unknown or disregarded ; and a few methods which, like that bathing in Jordan, are too

simple to commend themselves to the 'general.' Yet these principles and methods make education entirely effectual.

I should like to add that no statement that I have advanced in the following volume rests upon opinion only. Every point has been proved in thousands of instances, and the method may be seen at work in many schools, large and small, Elementary and Secondary.

I have to beg the patience of the reader who is asked to approach the one terminus by various avenues, and I cannot do so better than in the words of old Fuller :—
" Good Reader. I suspect I may have written some things twice; if not in the same words yet in sense, which I desire you to pass by favourably, forasmuch as you may well think, it was difficult and a dull thing for me in so great a number of independent sentences to find out the repetitions. . . . Besides the pains, such a search would cost me more time than I can afford it; for my glass of life running now low, I must not suffer one sand to fall in waste nor suffer one minute in picking of straws. . . . But to conclude this, since in matters of advice, Precept must be upon Precept, Line upon Line, I apologise in the words of St. Paul, ' To write the same things to you to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.' "

I am unwilling to close what is probably the last preface I shall be called upon to write without a very grateful recognition of the co-operation of those friends who are working with me in what seems to us a great cause. The Parents' National Educational Union has fulfilled its mission, as declared in its first prospectus, nobly and generously. " The Union exists for the benefit of parents and teachers of *all classes* ;" and, for the last eight¹ years it has undertaken the labour and expense of an energetic propaganda on behalf of Elementary Schools, of which

¹ Now ten.

about 150¹ are now working on the programmes of the Parents' Union School. During the last year a pleasing and hopeful development has taken place under the auspices of the Hon. Mrs. Franklin. It was suggested to the Head of a London County Council School to form an association of the parents of the children in that school, offering them certain advantages and requiring a small payment to cover expenses. At the first meeting one of the fathers present got up and said that he was greatly disappointed. He had expected to see some three hundred parents and there were only about sixty present ! The promoters of the meeting were, however, well pleased to see the sixty, most of whom became members of the Parents' Association, and the work goes on with spirit.

We are deeply indebted to many fellow-workers, but not even that very courteous gentleman who once wrote a letter to the Romans could make suitable acknowledgments to all of those to whom we owe the success of a movement the *rationale* of which I attempt to make clear in the following pages.

CHARLOTTE M. MASON.

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¹ Now over 300 in 1924.

A Short Synopsis

OF THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY ADVANCED IN THIS VOLUME

"No sooner doth the truth come into the soul's sight, but the soul knows her to be her first and old acquaintance."

"The consequence of truth is great; therefore the judgment of it must not be negligent." (WHICHCOTE).

1. Children are born *persons*.
2. They are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and for evil.
3. The principles of authority on the one hand, and of obedience on the other, are natural, necessary and fundamental; but—
4. These principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children, which must not be encroached upon, whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire.
5. Therefore, we are limited to three educational instruments—the atmosphere of environment, the disciplining of habit, and the presentation of living ideas. The P.N.E.U. Motto is: "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life."
6. When we say that "*education is an atmosphere*," we do not mean that a child should be isolated in what may be called a 'child-environment' especially adapted and prepared, but that we should take into account the educational value of his natural home atmosphere, both as regards persons and things, and should let him live freely among his proper conditions. It stultifies a child to bring down his world to the 'child's' level.
7. By "*education is a discipline*," we mean the discipline of habits, formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structures to habitual lines of thought, *i.e.*, to our habits.
8. In saying that "*education is a life*," the need of intellectual and moral as well as of physical sustenance is implied. The mind feeds on ideas, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum.

9. We hold that the child's mind is no mere *sac* to hold ideas ; but is rather, if the figure may be allowed, a spiritual *organism*, with an appetite for all knowledge. This is its proper diet, with which it is prepared to deal ; and which it can digest and assimilate as the body does foodstuffs.

10. Such a doctrine as *e.g.* the Herbartian, that the mind is a receptacle, lays the stress of Education (the preparation of knowledge in enticing morsels duly ordered) upon the teacher. Children taught on this principle are in danger of receiving much teaching with little knowledge ; and the teacher's axiom is " what a child learns matters less than how he learns it."

11. But we, believing that the normal child has powers of mind which fit him to deal with all knowledge proper to him, give him a full and generous curriculum ; taking care only that all knowledge offered him is vital, that is, that facts are not presented without their informing ideas. Out of this conception comes our principle that,—

12. "*Education is the Science of Relations*" ; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts : so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon *many living* books, for we know that our business is not to teach him all about anything, but to help him to make valid as many as may be of—

" Those first-born affinities

That fit our new existence to existing things."

13. In devising a SYLLABUS for a normal child, of whatever social class, three points must be considered :—

- (a) He requires *much* knowledge, for the mind needs sufficient food as much as does the body.
- (b) The knowledge should be various, for sameness in mental diet does not create appetite (*i.e.*, curiosity).
- (c) Knowledge should be communicated in well-chosen language, because his attention responds naturally to what is conveyed in literary form.

14. As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced, children should ' tell back ' after a single reading or hearing : or should write on some part of what they have read.

15. A *single reading* is insisted on, because children have naturally great power of attention ; but this force is dissipated by the re-reading of passages, and also, by questioning, summarising, and the like.

Acting upon these and some other points in the behaviour of mind, we find that *the educability of children is enormously*

greater than has hitherto been supposed, and is but little dependent on such circumstances as heredity and environment.

Nor is the accuracy of this statement limited to clever children or to children of the educated classes: thousands of children in Elementary Schools respond freely to this method, which is based on the *behaviour of mind*.

16. There are two guides to moral and intellectual self-management to offer to children, which we may call 'the way of the will' and 'the way of the reason.'

17. *The way of the will*: Children should be taught, (a) to distinguish between 'I want' and 'I will.' (b) That the way to will effectively is to turn our thoughts from that which we desire but do not will. (c) That the best way to turn our thoughts is to think of or do some quite different thing, entertaining or interesting. (d) That after a little rest in this way, the will returns to its work with new vigour. (This adjunct of the will is familiar to us as *diversion*, whose office it is to ease us for a time from will effort, that we may 'will' again with added power. The use of *suggestion* as an aid to the will is to be deprecated, as tending to stultify and stereotype character. It would seem that spontaneity is a condition of development, and that human nature needs the discipline of failure as well as of success.)

18. *The way of reason*: We teach children, too, not to 'lean (too confidently) to their own understanding'; because the function of reason is to give logical demonstration (a) of mathematical truth, (b) of an initial idea, accepted by the will. In the former case, reason is, practically, an infallible guide, but in the latter, it is not always a safe one; for, whether that idea be right or wrong, reason will confirm it by irrefragable proofs.

19. Therefore, children should be taught, as they become mature enough to understand such teaching, that the chief responsibility which rests on them as *persons* is the acceptance or rejection of ideas. To help them in this choice we give them principles of conduct, and a wide range of the knowledge fitted to them. These principles should save children from some of the loose thinking and heedless action which cause most of us to live at a lower level than we need.

20. We allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and 'spiritual' life of children, but teach them that the Divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits, and is their continual Helper in all the interests, duties and joys of life,

Contents

	PAGE
FOREWORD - - - - -	xxiii
PREFACE - - - - -	xxv
SYNOPSIS - - - - -	xxix
INTRODUCTION - - - - -	i

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

SELF-EDUCATION - - - - -	23
--------------------------	----

Not self-expression—A person, built up from within—Life, sustained on food—Plant analogy misleading—Mental and physical gymnastics—Mental food—The life of the mind—Proper sustenance—Knowledge, not sensation or information—Education, of the spirit—Cannot be applied from without—Modern educators belittle children—Education will profit by divorce from sociology—Danger of an alliance with pathology—A comprehensive theory—Fits all ages—Self-education—All children have intellectual capacity—Should learn to 'read' before mechanical art of reading—Are much occupied with things and books—A knowledge of principles, necessary—Education chaotic for want of unifying theory—The motive that counts.

CHAPTER II

CHILDREN ARE BORN PERSONS - - - - -	33
-------------------------------------	----

1.—*The Mind of a Child*: The baby, more than a huge oyster—Poets on infancy—Accomplishments of a child of two—Education does not produce mind—The range of a child's thoughts—Reason and imagination present in the infant—Will and wilfulness.

CHAPTER II—*Continued*

CHILDREN ARE BORN PERSONS - - - 33

2.—*The Mind of a School-Child*: Amazing potentialities—Brain, the organ of mind—The “unconscious mind,” a region of symptoms—Mind, being spiritual, knows no fatigue—Brain, duly fed, should not know fatigue—A “play-way” does not lead to mind—Nor does environment—Mind must come into contact with mind—What is mind?—Material things have little effect upon mind—Education, the evidence of things not seen—Ideas, only fit sustenance for mind—Children must have great ideas—Children *experience* what they hear and read of—Our want of confidence in children—Children see, in their minds—Mind, one and works altogether—Children must *see* the world—Dangers of technical, commercial, historical geography—Every man’s mind, his means of living—All classes must be educated—The aesthetic sense—A child’s intellect and heart already furnished—He learns to order his life.

3.—*Motives for Learning*: Diluted teaching—Every child has infinite possibilities—The Parents’ Union School—The House of Education—Teachers must know capabilities and requirements of children.

CHAPTER III

THE GOOD AND EVIL NATURE OF A CHILD - - - 46*

1.—*Well-Being of Body*: “Children of wrath”—“Little angel” theory—Good and evil tendencies—Education, handmaid of Religion—Religion becoming more magnanimous—New-born children start fair—Children, more of persons in their homes—Appetites—Senses—Undue nervous tension—Overpowering personality—Parasitic habits.

2.—*Well-Being of Mind*: Mind, not a chartered libertine—Has good and evil tendencies—Intellectual evil—Intellect enthroned in every child—A child’s vivifying imagination—Explanations unnecessary—Children *sense* the meaning of a passage—*Incuria*—Going over same ground—Dangers of specialisation—Of the *questionnaire*—Capacity *v.* aptness—Imagination, good and evil—Reason deified by the unlearned—Fallacious reasoning—A liberal education necessary—The beauty sense.

3.—*Intellectual Appetite*: The desires—Wrong use of—Love of knowledge sufficient stimulus.

4.—*Misdirected Affections*: The feelings—Love and justice—Moral education—Children must not be fed

CHAPTER III—*Continued*

THE GOOD AND EVIL NATURE OF A CHILD - 46

morally—They want food whose issue is conduct—Moral lessons worse than useless—Every child endowed with love—And justice—Rights and duties—Fine art of self-adjustment—To think fairly requires knowledge—Our thoughts are not our own—Truth, justice in word—Opinions show integrity of thought—Sound principles—All children intellectually hungry—Starve on the three R's.

5.—*The Well-Being of the Soul*: Education and the Soul of a child—Ignorance of the child—Approaches towards God—How knowledge grows—Narration—Great thoughts of great thinkers illuminate children—Education drowned by talk—Formative influence of knowledge—Self-expression—Education, a going forth of the mind—The "unconscious mind"—Mind always conscious—But thinks in ways of which we are unconscious—Dangers of introspection—"Complexes"—Necessity for a Philosophy of Education.

CHAPTER IV

AUTHORITY AND DOCILITY - 68

Deputed authority, lodged in everyone—No such thing as anarchy—A mere transference of authority—Authority makes for Liberty—Order, the outcome of authority—Docility, universal—The principles of authority and docility inherent in everyone—*Crux*, to find the mean—Freedom, offered as solution—"Proud subjection and dignified obedience"—Secured by feeding the mind—Subservience *v.* docility—Docility implies equality—Physical activities do not sustain mind—Many relationships must be established—No undue emphasis—Sense of *must* in teacher and child—Freedom comes with knowledge—The office makes the man—Children must have responsibility of learning—The potency of their minds—All children have quick apprehension—And the power of attention—Humane letters make for efficiency—Delightful to use any power—Common interests—Powers of attention and recollection a national asset—But want of intellectual interests a serious handicap.

CHAPTER V

THE SACREDNESS OF PERSONALITY - 80

An adequate conception of children necessary—All action comes from the ideas held—The child's estate higher than ours—Methods of undermining personality—

CHAPTER V—*Continued*

THE SACREDNESS OF PERSONALITY - - 80

Fear—Love—"Suggestion"—Influence—Methods of stultifying intellectual and moral growth—The desires—Of approbation—Of emulation—Of ambition—Of society—The natural desire of knowledge—Definite progress, a condition of education—Doctrine of equal opportunities for all, dangerous—But a liberal education the possibility for all.

CHAPTER VI

THREE INSTRUMENTS OF EDUCATION - - 94

1.—*Education is an Atmosphere* : Only three means of education—Not an artificial environment—But a natural atmosphere—Children must face life as it is—But must not be overburdened by the effort of decision—Dangers of intellectual feebleness and moral softness—Bracing atmosphere of truth and sincerity—Not a too stimulating atmosphere—Dangers of "running wild"—Serenity comes with the food of knowledge—Two courses open to us.

2.—*Education is a Discipline* : We must all make efforts—But a new point of view, necessary—Children must work for themselves—Must perform the *act of knowing*—Attention, the hall-mark of an educated person—Other good habits attending upon due self-education—Spirit, acts upon matter—Habit is to life what rails are to transport cars—Habit is inevitable—Genesis of habit—Habits of the ordered life—Habits of the religious life—De Quincey on going to church—Danger of thinking in a groove—Fads.

3.—*Education is a Life* : Life is not self-existing—Body pines upon food substitutes—Mind cannot live upon information—What is an idea?—A live thing of the mind—Potency of an idea—Coleridge on ideas—Platonic doctrine of ideas—Functions of education not chiefly gymnastic—Dangers attendant upon "original composition"—Ideas, of spiritual origin—The child, an eclectic—Resists forcible feeding—We must take the risk of the indirect literary form—Ideas must be presented with much literary padding—No one capable of making extracts—Opinions *v.* ideas—Given an idea, mind performs acts of selection and inception—Must have humane reading as well as human thought.

CHAPTER VII

HOW WE MAKE USE OF MIND - - 112

Herbartian Psychology—"Apperception masses"—Dangers of correlation—"Concentration series"—

CHAPTER VII—*Continued*

HOW WE MAKE USE OF MIND - - - 112

Children reduced to inanities—Mind, a spiritual organism—Cannot live upon “sweetmeats”—Burden of education thrown on teacher—Danger of exalting personality of teacher—“Delightful lessons”—*Across the Bridges*, by A. Paterson—Blind alleys—Unemployment—Best boys run to seed—Continuation Classes—Education Act of 1918—An eight hours’ University course—Academic ideal of Education—Continuation school, a People’s University—Dangers of utilitarian education—The “humanities” in English—Narration prepares for public speaking—Father of the People’s High Schools—Munich schools—Worship of efficiency—A well-grounded humanistic training produces capacity—Mr. Fisher on Continuation Schools—A more excellent way—Education from six to seventeen—A liberal education for all.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAY OF THE WILL - - - 128

Will, “the sole practical faculty”—“The will is the man”—Its function, to choose, to decide—Opinions provided for us—We take second-hand principles—One possible achievement, character—Aim in education, less conduct than character—Assaults upon the will—“Suggestion”—Voluntary and involuntary action—We must choose between suggestions—Danger of suggestion given by another with intent—Vicarious choosing—Weakens power of choice—Parasitic creatures may become criminal—Gordon Riots—His will, the safeguard of a man—Indecent to probe thoughts of the “unconscious mind”—Right thinking, *not* self-expression—It flows upon the stimulus of an idea—Will must be fortified—Knowledge of the “city of Mansoul” necessary—Also instruction concerning the will—Dangers of drifting—A child must distinguish between will and wilfulness—A strong will and “being good”—Will must have object outside of self—Is of slow growth—Will *v.* impulse—A constant will, compasses evil or good—The “single eye”—*Bushido*—Will, subject to solicitation—Does not act alone—Takes the whole man—He must *understand* in order to will—Will, a free agent—Choice, a heavy labour—Obedience, the sustainer of personality—Obedience of choice—Persons of constant will—Dangers of weak allowance—Two services open to all—Self and God—Will is supreme—Will wearies of opposition—Diversion—The “way of the will”—Freewill—We may not think what we please—Will supported by instructed conscience and trained reason—Education must prepare for immediate choice—Adequate education must be outward bound.

CHAPTER IX

THE WAY OF THE REASON - - - 139

Reason brings forward infallible proofs—May be furtherer of counsels, good *or* bad—Inventions—How did you think of it?—Children should follow steps of reasoning—Psychology of crime—Reasonable and right, not synonymous—Reason works involuntarily—Reason never begins it—Reason will affirm any theory—Logic, the formula of reason—But not necessarily right—Beauty and wonder of act of reasoning—But there are limitations—We must be able to expose fallacies—Karl Marx—Socialistic thought of to-day—Reason requires material to work upon—Reason subject to habit—Children must have principles—Be able to detect fallacies—Must know what Religion is—Miracles—Quasi-religious offers—Great things of life cannot be proved—Reason is fallible—Children, intensely reasonable—Reasoning power of a child does not wait upon training—But children do not generalise—Must not be hurried to formulate—Mathematics should not monopolise undue time—Cannot alone produce a reasonable soul.

CHAPTER X

THE CURRICULUM - - - 154

Standard in Secondary Schools set by public examinations—Elementary Schools less limited with regard to subjects—A complete curriculum in the nature of things—Education still at sea—Children have inherent claims—Law of supply and demand—Human nature a composite whole—The educational rights of man—We may not pick and choose—Shelley offers a key—Mistakes *v.* howlers—Knowledge should be consecutive, intelligent, complete—Hours of work, not number of subjects, bring fatigue—Short hours—No preparation.

SECTION I: THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD - 158

Knowledge of God indispensable—Mothers communicate it best—Relation to God a first-born affinity—"Kiddies" not expected to understand—School education begins at six—*No conscious mental effort* should be required earlier—Dr. Johnson on "telling again"—Two aspects of Religion—Attitude of Will towards God—Gradual perception of God—Goethe on repose of soul—Children must have passive as well as active principle—New Testament teaching must be grounded on Old—Sceptical children—Must not be evaded or answered finally—A thoughtful commentator necessary—Method of lessons, six to twelve, twelve to fifteen, fifteen to eighteen—Aids of modern scholarship—Dogmatic

CHAPTER X—*Continued*

teaching comes by inference—Very little hortatory teaching desirable—Synthetic study of life and teaching of Christ, a necessity—"Authentic comment" essayed in verse—Catechism—Prayer Book—Church History.

SECTION II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 169

(a) *History*: Montaigne on history—The League of Nations and its parallels—*Henry VIII* on precedent—Dangers of indifference to history—Rational patriotism depends upon knowledge of history—History must give more than impressions and opinions—P.U.S. method multiplies time—Concentrated attention given to the right books—Condition, a *single* reading—Attention a natural function—Teacher's interest an incentive—Teacher who "makes allowance" for wandering, hinders—Narration in the history lesson—Distinction between word memory and mind memory—English history for children of six to nine—Of nine to twelve—French history—Ancient history—For children of twelve to fifteen—Indian history—European history—History for pupils of fifteen to eighteen—Literature—A mental pageant of history—Gives weight to decisions, consideration to action, stability to conduct—Labour unrest—Infinite educability of all classes—Equal opportunity should be afforded—But uneasiness apt to follow—Knowledge brings its own satisfaction—Education merely a means of getting on, or, of progress towards high thinking and plain living.

II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 180

(b) *Literature*: Literature in Form I—Classics, not written down—In Form II—Children show originality in "mere narration"—Just as Scott, Shakespeare, Homer—Children all sit down to the same feast—Each gets according to his needs and powers—Reading for Forms III and IV—Abridged editions undesirable—Children take pleasure in the "dry" parts—Must have a sense of wide spaces for the imagination to wander in—Judgment turns over the folios of the mind—Statesmanship, formed upon wide reading—Reading for Forms V and VI (fifteen to eighteen).

II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 185

(c) *Morals and Economics: Citizenship*: Form I—Tales—Fables—Hears of great citizens—Form II—The inspiration of citizenship—Plutarch—Present day citizenship—Problems of good and evil—Plutarch does

CHAPTER X—*Continued*

not label actions—Children weary of the doctored tale—The human story always interesting—Jacob—The good, which is all virtuous, palls—Children must see life whole—Must be protected from grossness by literary medium—Learn the science of proportion—Difficulty of choosing books—Chastely taught children watch their thoughts—Expurgated editions—Processes of nature must not be associated with impurity—Games—Offences bred in the mind—Mind must be continually and wholesomely occupied—A sound body and a sound mind—*Ourselves, our Souls and Bodies*—An ordered presentation of the possibilities and powers of human nature.

II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 190

(d) *Composition*: Oral, from six to seven—Dangers of teaching composition—The art of "telling"—Power of composition innate—Oral and written from nine to twelve—Integral part of education in every subject—From twelve to fifteen—An inevitable consequence of free and exact use of books—Verse—Scansion—Rhythm—Accent—Subject must be one of keen interest—From fifteen to eighteen, some definite teaching—Suggestions or corrections—Education bears on the issues and interests of everyday life.

II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 209

(e) *Languages*: English—Grammar—Begin with sentence—Difficulty of abstract knowledge—French—Narration from the beginning—Italian—German—Latin.

II: THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN - - - 213

(f) *Art*: Art is of the spirit—Reverent knowledge of pictures themselves—Method—No talk of schools of painting or style—Picture tells its own tale—Drawing—Original illustrations—Figures—Objects—Colour—Field studies—Architecture—Clay-modelling—Artistic handicrafts—Musical Appreciation.

SECTION III: THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE UNIVERSE 218

(a) *Science*: Huxley—"Common information"—Books should be literary in character—French approach to science—Principles underlying science meet for literary treatment—Details of application too technical for school work—Universal principles must be linked