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THE PHILOSOPHY OF HELVETIUS

WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF SENSATIONALISM

BY

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M. G.

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PHILOSOPHY OF HELVETIUS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

That philosophical systems and educational ideas and practices are related, that changes in one are accompanied by changes in the other, even a superficial reading of the history of philosophy and the history of education will reveal. The changes in philosophy and education, it is true, are seldom simultaneous. But any important turn in philosophy does sooner or later effect a change in educational thought and practice. Likewise, a change in the direction of educational thinking and practice sooner or later affects philosophy.

With regard to the degree of intimacy of this relationship between education and philosophy, there is quite an extensive variation. At times the relationship is merely an external one and the influence is one of superficial action and reaction. The inner spirit remains unaffected. At other times, however, the relation between these two important aspects of human endeavor is so intimate that it is impossible to define the boundary between them. They merge imperceptibly into one another. They are mutually immanent. The change is simultaneously one in philosophical and in educational thinking.

That there should be a relationship is clear from the consideration that philosophy and education are not two clear and distinct entities and separate experiences, but rather two aspects of the same unitary web of social experience. Change in the reality given in social experience must be accompanied by the transformation of its external aspects. It is not philosophical thinking that influences educational thought and practice, or vice versa. The significance of the inner dynamic relation between the two is that the flux of our social experience is reflected ever differently in both philosophy and education. That there is a variation in this relationship, ranging from mere external mutual shaping to close intimacy, is due to the vice of the human mind to consider aspects of the same experience as distinct and mutually exclusive experiences. Philosophy becomes severed from the experience of which

it is a derivative, and, consequently, also from the other aspects in which experience reveals itself in reflection. Once that happens, once educational theory and philosophy no longer emanate consciously from social experience, then mutual influence can be but an external one.

The fruitfulness of both philosophical and educational thinking decreases with the decline in intimacy between both. Educational thinking severed from philosophy—at its best the contemplation of the whole of our social experience with regard to its greatest possibilities—becomes a mass of loosely coherent ideas, infinite in number, but almost infinitesimal in importance, a quibbling of the relative merits of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Philosophy severed from education, conceived as an effort to realize great social values, becomes a study of words and of artificial problems, devoid of meaning or bearing on the stream of living experience. The greater possibilities of education as an instrument for the reconstruction of our social experience, and of philosophy as that human activity which surveys experience with regard to its possibilities and desirabilities, are thus lost in a mass of verbal intricacies.

A considerable part of the history of philosophy and of the history of education are records of just such verbal futilities having but a remote bearing on life. From time to time, however, we come across moments when philosophy and educational thinking directly emerge from an effort to reconstruct experience. It is then that they become of momentous importance, that they reflect possibilities of a future more harmonious and more meaningful than the present. It is then, also, that the intimate relationship between education and philosophy shows itself. Philosophy reflects the possibilities and education attempts to turn these possibilities into actualities.

Undoubtedly, next to the thought of the Sophists, the origin of both educational ideals and philosophical ideas in social experience, their function in the reorganization of this experience and the intimate relation between philosophy and education resulting from common origin and function, is best exemplified by the French thought of the eighteenth century. The philosophy of the period was not a mere added link to the traditional philosophic chain; it was essentially and immediately derived from contemporary social conflicts and inharmonious situations. The func-

tion of the dominant philosophy of that period was not to make words consistent, but to size up the universe given in experience in order to see what might be made to take place in it. The philosophy of the period was prospective rather than retrospective. It was a hypothesis based on experience primarily social and intended to function within the same context. Educational thought, too, as it presented itself, then, was sweeping. To many of the educational thinkers, to those who made the century, the problem of education was how to create a new man compatible with a new social order.

Professor Dewey defines philosophy as "the general theory of education." [1] This is rather a statement of a possibility than of an actuality. Due, however, to the social origin of philosophy and to the interest in education in the eighteenth century, French philosophy there and then came very close to being actually a "general theory of education."

What was a tendency with most of the eighteenth century French thinkers was fully explicit in Helvetius. To him philosophy is a theory of education. His principal works, *De l'Esprit* and *De l'Homme,* are primarily concerned with the function of education in the life of the individual and of society. The main effort of these works is to formulate what might be expected from education and legislation in the attempt of reconstructing the individual and society in the image of ideal values. Philosophy to him is such general formulation of the universe, given in our experience, as has a bearing on this question. Practical considerations dictated the theoretical formulation of his philosophic ideas. Though it might appear superficially that Helvetius derived his educational system from a few theoretical assumptions, the truth of the matter is the exact opposite. Helvetius formulated his philosophy in the way he did because of educational considerations.

The primary aim of this book is to present the thought of Helvetius as (*a*) a variant of the thought derived from the social situation in eighteenth century France; and as (*b*) the articulation of the ethical and educational implications of the central theme of the thought complex of which it was thus a variant—sensationalism. It will, it is hoped, illustrate the origin and function of philosophy in concrete social situations, the real importance

[1] *Encyclopedia of Education.* "Philosophy of Education," Vol. IV, p. 699.

and constructive possibilities of both philosophy and education, and the possible inner relationship of the two.

Another aim of this book is to place the thought of Helvetius in juxtaposition with that of some of his contemporaries, especially with regard to educational issues that still occupy the center of educational discussion. Both in his statement of sensationalism and in his exposition of its practical implications, ethical and educational, Helvetius was an extremist. His views conflicted in detail and sometimes even in important assumptions, with those of his contemporaries. Now, some of the issues of these conflicts are fundamental in contemporary educational thought. There are quite a number of problems around which the thought of today revolves on which eighteenth century thought throws a bright light and shows their greater meaning. Race *vs.* culture, heredity *vs.* education, the application of our knowledge of individual differences in education, are among the most important problems of education. With less scientific precision, but nevertheless with great practical insight, these problems were discussed in the eighteenth century. In Rousseau and Helvetius, for example, we find one stressing original nature unfolding itself spontaneously as forming the basis of education, and the other stressing the deliberate nurture of a desirable kind as forming its basis. Both were motivated by a desire to make education function in the reorganization of society and of the individual but each thought that the aspect singled out by him alone promised to be fruitful as a foundation of an educational endeavor having that sweeping end in view. It is more than likely that the present-day discussion of these topics is largely a lineal descendant of the earlier eighteenth century discussion. The consideration of the various points of issue between Helvetius and his contemporaries is therefore of definite value. The writer will not attempt to enter into details of these divergences. Only the salient points of the discussion will be given. It is hoped, however, that the treatment will be sufficient to throw some light on the meaning of the problems that occupy now the forefront of sociological and educational thought.

The statement of Helvetius' point of view will be given objectively. Though the writer fully recognizes the limitations of sensationalistic philosophy and of its ethical and educational implications, though he realizes the central fallacy of the sensationalistic

point of view, yet he will not, except for the criticism implied in comparison with other points of view, introduce direct criticism in the body of the work. It is hoped that the very statement of Helvetius' position will show that, though it emerges from a real social situation, from a need of social reconstruction and a desire for progress, it is not, upon a full view, a philosophy of progress, and a system of education built upon it as a foundation cannot be instrumental in a process of orderly progress. Whatever direct criticism the writer wishes to offer, directed more against sensationalism as a whole and its implications rather than against Helvetius, will be summed up in the last chapter.

PART I

BACKGROUND OF HELVETIUS' THOUGHT

INTRODUCTION

An idea, a system of ideas, or a philosophical formulation is meaningless as it stands isolated. To give it meaning it must be related (*a*) to the life, activities, interests, and ambitions of the person who expounds it, and (*b*) to the dominant problems and interests characterizing the social situation in which that thinker lives, and to the complex of ideas derived from those problems and interests in which they are reflected. In the case of a philosopher like Descartes, who enters philosophy through the avenue of physical science and who wants to shut out all outside influences in order to attain valid truths, a knowledge of the social milieu is apparently less helpful in an effort at understanding him than in the case of a philosopher like Helvetius, who approaches philosophy from the social angle and seeks outside influences in order that his own thought might thereby become crystallized. Nevertheless, even for Descartes, the interests of the time were of great importance in shaping his thought. Science as a starting point and method as the goal of philosophy were dominant interests in the intellectual society of which Descartes, in spite of his voluntary isolation, was a member, and these interests form the center of his thought. In the case of Helvetius, however, and for that matter, any of his contemporaries, the social element is of immense importance, compared with the individual element, for purposes of understanding his thought. The individuals of that period, more than of any other period, seem to be the agents of a stream of thought rather than the authors of it. Most of the ideas of Helvetius are also those of Diderot, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, la Mettrie, and Voltaire. It is only the emphasis that varies. This being so, it is essential to an understanding of his thought to sur-

vey the social situation, the conflicts, problems, interests, and hopes of the time, and the ideas in which they are reflected.

The aim of the present part of the book is to present the life and times of Helvetius. As the background of his thought, a brief story of his life, followed by a brief description of his works, forms the substance of the first chapter. A survey of the social and intellectual milieu of Helvetius is then presented to show the background of his thought, as well as its forward meaning. The development of the central idea of Helvetius' writings—sensationalism, the articulating of the ethical and educational implications which is the chief achievement of Helvetius—is then traced in the final chapter of this section.

CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF HELVETIUS[1]

CLAUDE ADRIAN HELVETIUS was born in 1715. Thus the year of the birth of Helvetius was also the year of the death of Louis XIV, whose life marks the zenith, as well as the early stages of the setting, of monarchical France. The same year also saw the death of Malebranche, one of the greatest continuers of Cartesian thought. Fenelon, Pascal, and Bousset had died somewhat earlier. New men and new thought and new problems were beginning to occupy French thought. What these were we shall see in the next chapter.

A few words about the time relations of Helvetius to the other thinkers of the century will suffice. When Helvetius was still young, the Abbé de St. Pierre and Fontenelle were old men whose thoughts were, nevertheless, related to the thought of younger men. They apparently influenced their younger contemporaries without being influenced by them. During the early manhood of Helvetius, when his thought took shape, Montesquieu (1689-1755) and Voltaire (1694-1778) were mature men with established reputations whose thought was shaping that of younger thinkers, but who were also subject to the influence of the younger men. Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau, and Condillac were practically of the same age as Helvetius, and probably mutually felt the influences of one another. La Mettrie (1709-1751), though not considerably older than the members of the group just mentioned, functioned more as a shaper of the thought of his age than as a co-thinker. The principal English thinkers whose thought bore resemblances to that of Helvetius and who were his contemporaries were Hume, Adam Smith, and Hartley. Shaftesbury, the proponent of the "moral-sense" theory against which Helvetius directed his criticism, died two years before the latter's birth.

[1] Where not otherwise stated, the authority for the facts of the life of Helvetius is Keim's exhaustive volume, *The Life and Works of Helvetius*. It was not deemed practical to give references, except to the more important facts.

Helvetius was a descendant of what seems to have been a very aggressive and ambitious stock. Originally of the Palatinate, the family was forced on account of religious persecution to migrate to Holland and thence to France. Helvetius' ancestors in the paternal line were physicians of distinction. His grandfather was ennobled by Louis XIV. His father performed what Morley considers a "doubtful service to humanity" in saving the life of Louis XV, and subsequently became physician to the Queen. The Helvetius family did not, however, remain content with professional practice. They busied themselves also with writing and investigating. "Curiosity and welfare work were traits of the Helvetius family. . . . Among its traditions were work, research, imagination and observation." [2] The searching spirit of the subject of this study which placed him in line with the other pioneer spirits of the century, his aggressiveness and ambition, which accounted for a good deal of his material as well as literary-philosophical achievements, were thus likely inherited traits in Helvetius. His medical family tradition was possibly an influential contributary factor in the making of Helvetius' character and mentality. Possibly it contributed to the central *motif* of his writings—the quest for the empirical welfare of the individual. Helvetius like William James approached philosophy from the physician's angle and it is quite likely that what medical training did for the latter, family tradition did for the former. The professional, middle-class origin of Helvetius is also worthy of note. As we shall see in the following chapter, the philosophy shared by him with his contemporaries reflected the needs and aspirations of the middle class.

The early childhood of Helvetius probably promised nothing extraordinary. At the age of eleven he entered the College of Louis le Grand, where he rose above mediocrity only in his classical studies. His interest in the classics attracted to him the attention of the famous humanist, Père Poirée, who earlier had instructed Voltaire. His years in college made him a master of the classical languages and subjected him to the influence of their style. The faculty of expression clearly recognizable in his writings, the epigrammatic and metaphorical statements with which his works bristle, the frequent drawing from classical literature and history, is very largely due to his mastery of the classics. Not

[2] Keim: *Helvétius, Sa Vie et Sa Œuvre*, p. 9.

only did the classics influence the form which his thought took, but, probably in a large measure, also determined its very substance. It must be remembered that the social life of the Greeks and Romans as reflected in their literature was since the Renaissance the inspiration of utopias and the stimulant to dissatisfaction with the present. This was particularly the case with the "Philosophes," one of whom was Helvetius.

The earliest, as well as the strongest, determining influence over the thought of Helvetius was wielded by Locke, with whose *Essay* Helvetius acquainted himself while still in college. We find him proposing, in the earliest days of his acquaintance with Voltaire, to write a poem, one object of which was to prove "that Locke has opened the road to truth, which is that of happiness." [3] Already in his earliest poetical composition, "Sur l'Ourgueil," written as an exercise for Voltaire's criticism, he writes "Let Locke be your guide so that in your first years he will steady your still trembling paces." Locke is credited with having been "the only one to perceive the rays of truth in the fog of superstition," with having lowered the pride of Platonism with the rehabilitation of Pyrrhonism, and with having pointed out that truth is an achievement rather than a gift.[4] We see thus that he attributed his opposition to fanaticism, his sensationalism and his hedonism to the influence of Locke. While the degree of sensationalism of Helvetius was, as we shall see, probably determined by Condillac, yet his turn in the direction of sensationalism was probably due to Locke's influence. The construction of his ethical system on self-interest determined by the feeling of pleasure and pain may have been suggested by the chapter on "Power," in which Locke comes nearest to hedonism.[5] Keim is probably right in maintaining that though Helvetius was not in all respects of the school of Locke, yet the influence of Locke over him was very profound.[6]

Helvetius was, as we have said, of middle-class origin. In spite of the fact that his grandfather was ennobled, the standing of his family was rather that of "haute bourgeoisie" than of the nobility. In his choice of a profession the factor of his social status probably figured. He decided to prepare himself for the functions of

[3] Helvétius: *Œuvres Complètes,* Le Petit Ed., T. III, p. 43.
[4] Keim, *op. cit.,* p. 145.
[5] Locke: *Essay on Human Understanding,* Book II, Chap. 21.
[6] Keim, *op. cit.,* p. 88.

a Farmer General of Taxes that his parents hoped to obtain for him through utilization of court influence.

In preparation for his professional work he was apprenticed to his uncle who was Farmer of Taxes in the province of Caen. During his apprenticeship he picked up a knowledge of finance and his interests were widened to include economic questions, interests which are apparent in his main works, *De l'Esprit* and *De l'Homme*. Helvetius, however, was not satisfied with being a mere Farmer General and having his life exhaust itself in his professional activities. He was ambitious of shining primarily in the literary world. The material means that he expected to have at his disposal were to be subservient to this end. While still undergoing his apprenticeship, he succeeded in becoming a member of the Caen Academy. This period saw the maturation of his first literary effort, a tragedy entitled *Le Comte de Fiesque,* which, however, was never presented and of which no trace is left.

In 1738, at the age of twenty-three, Helvetius obtained a place in the company of the Farmers General, which place he held until 1749. This was the formative period of his life. It is during this period that he made the personal contacts which proved so fruitful and roughly formulated his ideas which found expression in his main works. In his philosophical poems, which were all written during this period, is to be found the germ of all his thought.

A few words ought to be said about Helvetius' attitude toward his professional work. He undoubtedly found it difficult to render it compatible with the spirit of progress, in the light of which the system of farming taxes was a great abuse. He showed his magnanimity by refusing to avail himself of confiscation. He attempted to diminish the abuses of the system within the limits that the system permitted. His revolutionary spirit is evident in his advice to the Bordeaux merchants. When an appeal to the Farmers on the part of the merchants, pointing out that a proposed tax would prove ruinous to them, proved to be of no avail, Helvetius told them that ". . . as long as you will do no more than complain you will not get what you demand. Make yourselves feared. You can assemble more than ten thousand. Attack our employees. They are no more than two hundred. I will place myself at their head and we will defend ourselves. But finally you will defeat us and then we shall render you justice." [7]

[7] Quoted by Keim, *op. cit.*, p. 45.