

EDUCATION

A SEARCH FOR NEW PRINCIPLES

By

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“The gods had much rather that mankind
should resemble than flatter them.”

MARCUS AURELIUS.

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CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

"Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful ; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good of everything ; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason."—PLATO, *Republic*.

THE reader should be warned here and now that it is not intended either to use the Educational Philosophy of Plato as the foundation of workable Principles of Education for our times, or to hold up to our teachers and society, as an admonishment, the ideals of the Greeks to offset the failures of the present century. Either course would doubtless demand the respectful attention of many of our leaders of Educational thought, for their rise to the eminence of leadership in this branch of social philosophy often owes much to their knowledge and quotation of Plato, Aristotle and their followers. Not that there is anything against these ancient sages ; as an expression of the highest ideals of contemporary Greek civilization the philosophy of Plato is as wise as it is beautiful.

Plato is chosen for no other reason than that his theory, which is diligently studied, at first or at second hand, by our teachers, contrasts so sharply with the realities of Education in practice. And this contrast demonstrates most clearly the need for the recognition, by educationists, of the essential interdependence of the social milieu and the contemporary theory and practice in Education.

From this point it will be possible to go forward to an examination of the results of this interdependence,

and from thence to determine new, and, it is hoped, workable Principles of Education.

The Educational Method of Plato, as described in the foregoing quotation (it would be well to read it again), is to surround the youth of his times with an environment in which moderation, order, harmony and courage are apparent on every side. He would even go so far as to arrange a censorship of words, rhythms, melodies and all sights and sounds which help to make up this environment. And his ultimate object is to "insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason."

What does such a method imply?

It suggests that in some of their relationships, economic, social or individual, the Greeks did not follow the precepts and example of their philosophers. There was, in fact, even in the age when Greek life seems to have been purest, a definite cleavage between philosophical precept and social practice. And this cleavage made necessary the seclusion of the youth from society during the period of its education.

Whether this method of education in a secluded and carefully ordered environment justified itself in the days of Plato and Aristotle is doubtful. That it produced many "good men" who approached the philosophers' ideal is certain. But whether it produced a "good" society through the precept and example of these "good men" is a more difficult question. For it must be remembered, first, that this was a slave civilization and only a small proportion of the slaves benefited by the education, and, secondly, that the golden age did not last long under the influence of the philosophers, for gradually the cleavage between precept and practice, in social and individual relations, became wider.

All that need be said now is that Greek ideals of virtue and goodness can have meaning only in so far, and so long, as they reflected the practical social and individual relationships within the community. After all, that is the ultimate practical test for any philosophy.

Can the methods of the Greeks, and their ideals of physical, moral and aesthetic education, help the teachers and educationists in our society? It is, of course, impracticable in our society completely to separate the children from outside influence during their period of education. To bring up a child in the complete seclusion of Plato's ordered environment, and then place him (be it never so gently) into the social life of our times, would be almost as disastrous, in its results, as removing a budding orchid from a hothouse into a snowstorm; the orchid certainly would not flower.

Even so, our educationists maintain that, following the broad principles of Plato and his disciples, much can be done in our schools to produce citizens who understand justice, truth and order, and whose virtues are strengthened by a knowledge and appreciation of beauty and reason. Unfortunately, the cleavage between philosophically accepted ideals and human behaviour, which was noticeable even in the Greek period at its best, has gradually become wider and wider. Methods of bridging this gap—now a gulf—vary in different civilizations and in different periods of history. At the time of Plato, to quote P. R. Cole¹: "For the minority of the Greeks there was unity between theory and practice. They followed philosophy, but not religious precepts. . . . [These were far below the accepted philosophical standards.] . . . The principal safeguards of conduct were,

¹ *History of Educational Thought*: London, 1931, Oxford University Press.

in fact, law and custom, patriotism, the conception of moral nobility as eternal, the idea that pleasure accompanies the good life, a popular belief in Fate and the Furies, moral teaching based upon Homer and the theogony of Hesiod, a conception of family honour, a desire for fame after death, and a close supervision of the whole period of boyhood by trusted slaves called pedagogues."

This mixture of tradition, mythology and philosophy was only partially successful in maintaining the quality of Greek civilization. And this partial success did not last for long. Traditions are always in a state of conflict with the new activities and social relationships which inevitably accompany developments in the economic life of the community. Mythology may influence the behaviour of the group and the individual in ceremonial activities and seasonal occupations, but it rarely stands up for long against the expansive demands of trade and commerce. The philosophers, with their educational system, strove the harder to reinforce the bounds which tradition and mythology let loose.

The authority of religious precepts, which were modified to support the philosophical concepts of the "good" and the "beautiful," failed to increase, or even maintain, the influence of philosophy and education on social and individual behaviour. As this influence weakened, the great philosophers and teachers retired more and more into the seclusion of their academies, where their discussion and teaching became more complex and intangible and even less useful as a guide to the community outside.

So it was in ancient Greece: and so in Rome. It is difficult to reconcile the highest aspirations of Virgil and Livy, Tacitus, Pliny and Plutarch, with the social life in Rome when Augustus, Nero or Caligula were Emperors.

For the philosophers of these times seclusion was enough; often safety lay only in silence.

Until the end of the fifteenth century the teaching of the ancient philosophers was lost to Western Europe. Under feudalism there had been no use for philosophy anyway, for, in the feudal community, personal relations were dictated by well-established economic relations. What education there was belonged to the monasteries and was almost exclusively religious. But by the sixteenth century the old feudalism had disappeared, and entirely new relationships, economic and social, soon established themselves. The distinction between different classes of society was now real; the economic basis of this distinction included a form of competition which the feudal mind would never have understood—that is, rivalry between individuals to obtain a livelihood by working, or by buying and selling the products of others' work.

But during this period of transition Education gained a new meaning; for, from this time onwards, it became a necessity for a gradually increasing number of men to have some secular education. To read and write and to calculate were important assets in the commercial life which was to follow.

It is reasonable to suppose that the new spirit of rivalry between individuals (which, of course, was not widespread until after the sixteenth century) resulted in the growth of new attitudes towards one's neighbour, the modification of existing attitudes. Such emotional dispositions as, for example, jealousy, suspicion, hate and fear must have changed in quality—how completely we cannot judge—since the days of feudalism when the old economic relationships which determined social behaviour were different.

In the great centres of learning, Oxford and Cambridge

religion and classical philosophy ruled side by side. True, it was not a partnership on equal terms, yet the platonic ideals of beauty, truth and honour, and the rules of moderation, order and reason, were often adopted by the poets and dramatists and men of letters in place of the more purely Christian virtues. As long as the splendid nobility of Elizabeth's days maintained its stability the neo-platonic ideals showed their influence in the chivalry of the Court. But these ideals of virtue had not the same meaning for Sidney and Spenser as they had for Plato; they were accepted (and within narrow limits practised) as an embellishment, grafted upon a changed and changing basis of practical human relationships. The new "philosophers" did not examine the soil to see if it would feed the rare plant they had discovered. Once again Greek ideals, Christianized or not, failed to become a part of everyday social practice.

When a philosophical concept comes into sharp conflict with a changing system of practical human relationships, it can either retire into honourable seclusion as an "ideal" or accept patiently (I almost said "philosophically") the inevitable re-interpretation or modification by the more enlightened philosophers of the times.

After almost two hundred years of honourable retirement, the platonic "ideals" of beauty and virtuous action, sometimes taken from the original Greek writings, sometimes from a second-hand source like Spenser and Milton, were welcomed into the drawing-rooms of society once again.

From 1500 the great age of Geographical Discovery, from 1800 the great age of Scientific Discovery, brought within the comprehension of man vast new possibilities. In the first period the discovery of new sources of wealth,

in the second the discovery of new forces by which to create wealth, liberated within humanity itself new springs of thought and action.

Perhaps those men who harnessed the newly discovered powers to machines needed a blend of romanticism, idealism and religion to help them forget the horror and degradation in the lives of their fellow-men who worked in the factories and mines. Keats, Shelley, Scott, Lamb, Wordsworth and Coleridge were products of this same society. Idealism, sentiment and sentimentality oozed from their essays, poetry and novels. The romanticism of the age, except in rare instances, passed over the classical rules of moderation, order and reason, and Art, whose social function should be to translate philosophy into popular form, sought beauty in intangibility, reason in mysticism, and justice only in the heavens above.

The cleavage between religion and philosophy on the one hand, and the practical relationship of man with man on the other, was almost complete. It was easier to persuade man to lament the captivity of an ass,¹ or the destruction of a tree,² than it was to persuade him

¹ Coleridge : " To a Young Ass."

" Poor little foal of an oppressed race !
I love the languid patience of thy face :
And oft with gentle hand I give thee bread,
And clap thy ragged coat, and pat thy head. . . .

Or is thy sad heart thrill'd with filial pain
To see thy wretched mother's shorten'd chain ?
And truly, very piteous is her lot,—
Chain'd to a log within a narrow spot,
Where the close-eaten grass is scarcely seen,
While sweet around her waves the tempting green."

(From *Poems* 1796.)

² Wordsworth : " Nutting."

" Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky. . . ." (1799.)

of the human nature and consequent rights of all his fellow-men.

While the exuberance and vitality of the writers and poets at the beginning of the nineteenth century recall the spirit of wonder and expectancy in Elizabethan literature, the almost complete severance of art from the broad masses of society in the later age is significant. The Elizabethan people clung to drama, folk music and poetry as their own, as an expression of their consciousness and joy in living. (Beside this art, the poetry and novels of the narrow Court circle show superficiality and false ornamentation.) But the joy and vitality of the Romantics, in spite of all the efforts of the "Lyrical Ballad" poets, did not express a kindred feeling in the hearts of the people who lived through the first decades of the Industrial Revolution.

Like Rousseau, Wordsworth applauded the idea of educating man according to the example and laws of nature.¹ He disliked the new society of the towns.² In the first flush of enthusiasm for Rousseau's rights of the individual, Wordsworth supported the French Revolution,³ but, failing to understand what this great social upheaval really meant, he retired, at the thought of bloodshed, to the soothing seclusion of the Lakes. Henceforward his poetic mind could only face the city at night.⁴

Keats and Shelley⁵ were equally unaware of the real significance of the Industrial Revolution, and because they had little practical contact with the masses of the people their contribution to social consciousness was very

¹ In "The Prelude."

² Compare "Michael" and "The Prelude"—Book Seven, etc.

³ "Bliss is it in this dawn to be alive."

⁴ Sonnet on Westminster Bridge.

⁵ Shelley's outcries against social injustice rarely find a place in anthologies of his poems.

slight. Their art was for man in isolation, for it expressed nothing of the practical relationship of man with man.

“... Oh why should I
Feel cursed and thwarted when the liegeless air
Yields to my step aspirant? Why should I
Spurn the green turf as hateful to my feet?
Goddess benign! point forth some unknown thing,
Are there not other regions than this isle?
What are the stars? There is the sun, the sun!

I have heard the cloudy thunder: Where is power?
Whose hand, whose essence, what divinity
Makes this alarum in the Elements,
While I here idle listen on the shores
In fearless yet in aching ignorance?
Knowledge enormous makes a God of me,
Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions,
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
Creations and destroyings, all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me, as if some blithe wine,
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk
And so become immortal.”

(“Hyperion.”)

The influence of Rousseau did not basically affect the philosophical attitude of the nineteenth century. Plato had claimed the right and the authority to mould human nature, without taking into consideration the dynamic interrelation between social environment and human behaviour. His ideals would work, therefore, only *in vacuo*. And that is precisely where they did continue to function; in the minds of philosophers and poets, but rarely in the actions of social man.

Now, Rousseau demanded the complete freedom of the individual to develop according to the laws of nature; by which he usually meant the innate nature of man. He had much to contribute to the service of Education

in some of his suggestions, such as: "Nature would have children be children before being men," and in his request to his tutors to substitute well-regulated liberty for the ordinary educational instruments of "emulation, jealousy, envy, vanity, covetousness and debasing fear." But his emphasis on human nature, the unchanging and unchangeable inborn nature of man, as the key to education for citizenship, shows that his philosophical attitude has the same shortcoming as that of Plato and his disciples. He failed to recognize the essential inter-relationship between the social milieu and the contemporary mind. "Emulation, jealousy, envy, vanity, covetousness and debasing fear" were to Rousseau the inevitable concomitant of social life, especially in the cities. That these qualities attached themselves to human nature, thriving in this special social milieu of the cities, did not lead him to examine the why or the wherefore of such a phenomenon. "Man is naturally good, but socially depraved," and that is the end of it.

At the end of *Emile*, Rousseau can say: "Here is the good man, shown as he emerges through the formative processes of education. The Good State will be that which offers him scope and opportunity and sets up no conflict between his civil duty and his moral judgment." Rousseau's idea, then, was the education of the unchanging nature of man for life in a State which he knew did not exist.

The task of the present day is to educate the changed and changing nature of the child in relation to a new social milieu which we know can exist, and which we will plan consciously and scientifically. In building this new society the child will play his part, for it is his heritage that we plan to build. Mistakes will be made, but they will be recognized and remedied as they become apparent. "Truth comes more readily out of error than out of

confusion," wrote Bacon, and confusion can result only from wrong premises.

Here are the children; here our world with all its wealth and power and beauty; and here too the sum of countless ages of toil, experience and thought; enough of knowledge to wrest from our world the food for life and enjoyment. The interrelation between these three prime factors has gone wrong; we must examine why, and if, like many a scientist, we find error has accumulated upon error, for long-accepted premises were wrong, we must face the toil of reconstruction cheerfully, for the future is at stake.

CHAPTER II

THE SCHOOL AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

WHEN people are confronted with obvious contradictions between principle and practice in our society they usually react in one or more of these ways :

Some express a violent, unreasoned antagonism towards the unfortunate human being who has drawn their attention to the contradiction. This reaction has much in common with the way a patient reacts to the clinical psychologist when he suggests the real, but unconscious, causes of behaviour.

Others dismiss the contradiction as an inevitable and unchangeable state of affairs which owes its origin to forces completely beyond human control.

A few—benevolent and bewhiskered—content themselves by saying, "Look what has been done to improve the situation; it takes time, you know." It is only a short step from this attitude to that of the teacher (now retired) who pointed out that it was not necessary to agitate for smaller classes in our schools, for the declining birth-rate would solve the problem for us in time!

And yet a great many adopt the attitude of Ratty in "The Wild Wood"¹: hardship, hunger, danger, and maybe death are just around the corner, but it is bad form to speak of it; for to be constantly reminded of such unpleasant eventualities spoils one's appetite. I remember a President of the National Union of Teachers making all these excuses at once when I presented him with a press article in which I had pointed out that a Government Grant, covering all the requirements to make the 1936 Education Act work, would cost the nation less

¹ *Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Grahame : London, Methuen.

each year than the next war would cost each day. Against the President's advice, I submitted the article to the Editor of the local newspaper; it was accepted, except for the financial comparison which the Editor blue-pencilled, casually observing, "The Public don't like such comparisons, you know."

There is at the present time a deep and widespread consciousness that our Educational system is not satisfactory. After the war this consciousness will seek to translate itself into planning and action. And there is plenty of evidence that the people of Britain will not be satisfied with a patched-up system of Education any more than they will be satisfied with a patched-up Peace. They will welcome an examination of fundamentals when the time comes to plan the reconstruction of our social, economic and political life. The realities of the war have come too close to be idealized and they have struck too deeply to be forgotten. The social consciousness of the people has been shaken as never before. They have experienced disillusionment and distrust. These feelings still linger, no longer in relation to the future, but projected upon past forms and traditions, and upon those members of society who still defend them.

With the invasion of Soviet Russia came hope.

But the magnificent defence of the Soviet Union not only surprised the general public by revealing the real strength of organization and resources in this "Backward" country, it showed and continues to show the fine texture of a civilization which had hitherto been misrepresented and misunderstood, and it provided the peoples in the Democracies with the opportunity of finding out the true nature of Soviet ideals and achievements.

Hope became stronger as admiration grew. The tremendous sacrifices, the tremendous faith and the

unbreakable unity of the Soviet peoples has given to the people of Britain a new meaning for their own struggle. It has opened up in the minds of many the possibility of a new social order after the war, and it is the right to build this new society which they are fighting for.

Our view of the Soviet Russia at war is less distorted than was our view of the Soviets at peace, and there has resulted in our midst a wave of self-criticism against which propaganda dare no longer train its loudest guns. For it is now apparent that:

- (a) The Soviet people are not uncivilized.
- (b) The Soviet Government does not persecute religion.
- (c) They may have omitted, in some instances, to fit bath plugs, but on the whole their industrial organization must be fairly efficient.
- (d) (And this is most astonishing to the prejudiced mind) The 160,000,000 members of the Soviet Union have demonstrated an unshakable faith in their new civilization.

True criticism must begin with self-criticism. The courage to admit that long-established theories, attitudes and traditions may have led civilization astray is the first necessity in planning a new world after the war. This will be a new quality of courage, for it will owe its strength to a faith in human ability, and to a deep love of humanity, and it will attain its success from an understanding born of unprejudiced investigation. The search for new Principles for Education cannot be undertaken without such courage. The first task is to examine the present condition of Education with special reference to such Principles as are generally accepted.

Every teacher has a vague recollection of books on "Principles of Education" and "Educational Thought,"

which had to be read during the period of training. After only a few years of teaching there remains, of this reading and study, little in the mind of the teacher save the title of a "Set Book." All those chapters on "Training of the Emotions," "Nature and Nurture," "Discipline," "Suggestion," "The Adolescent," etc., etc., which at the time of reading seemed full of inspiration and possibilities, are remembered only as headings, or definitions or, more vaguely, as "Ideals." The teacher, looking back on the enthusiasm of his Training Centre days, often laughs at the credulity which allowed him to build his hopes upon such foundations. And, as a teacher of experience, he will adopt a somewhat superior air, when these forgotten authorities are quoted, and say, "Well, we have not the time to bother with these ideas nowadays; they're all right in a book, you know; in any case they won't work in a school, you can take it from me." If pressed to say why they won't work in the school, the answer will invariably include references to: home conditions, size of classes, school accommodation, lack of equipment, discipline, the influence of the cinema and the nature of the child.

The teacher is quite right; the Principles of Education, which seemed so full of insight and promise, yield a very poor return in actual teaching practice. The astonishing fact, however, is that teachers and educationists generally accept this sorry state of affairs as a natural condition. The Principles are looked upon as Ideals, and Ideals are looked down upon as "something unattainable, anyway."

The more we examine our Educational practice, the more apparent it becomes that there are no practical guiding Principles to direct the efforts of our teachers. This is admitted by Dr. F. H. Spencer in his recent book *Education for the People*.¹ He points out that there is no

¹ London, 1941, George Routledge & Sons.