

John Locke

Some Thoughts Concerning Education  
and  
Of the Conduct of the Understanding

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# Some Thoughts Concerning Education

(1693)

Doctrina vires promovet insitas,  
rectique cultus pectora roborant:  
utcunque defecere mores,  
dedecorant bene nata culpa.<sup>1</sup>

Horace Bk. IV Ode 4

John Locke

1. "Teaching improves implanted strength, and right cultivation strengthens the heart; whenever morals fail, the faults dishonor the wellborn."

Verses.

§174. If these may be any reasons against children's making Latin themes at school, I have much more to say and of more weight against their making *verses*, verses of any sort. For if he has no *genius* to *poetry*, it is the most unreasonable thing in the world to torment a child and waste his time about that which can never succeed; and if he have a poetic vein, it is to me the strangest thing in the world that the father should desire or suffer it to be cherished or improved. Methinks the parents should labor to have it stifled and suppressed, as much as may be; and I know not what reason a father can have to wish his son a poet who does not desire to have him bid defiance to all other callings and business; which is not yet the worst of the case. For if he proves a successful rhymers and get once the reputation of a wit, I desire it may be considered what company and places he is likely to spend his time in, nay, and estate too: for it is very seldom seen that anyone discovers mines of gold or silver in Parnassus.<sup>89</sup> 'Tis a pleasant air, but a barren soil; and there are very few instances of those who have added to their patrimony by anything they have reaped from thence. Poetry and gaming, which usually go together, are alike in this too, that they seldom bring any advantage but to those who have nothing else to live on. Men of estates almost constantly go away losers; and it is well if they escape at a cheaper rate than their whole estates or the greatest part of them. If therefore you would not have your son the fiddle to every jovial company, without whom the sparks could not relish their wine nor know how to pass an afternoon idly, if you would not have him waste his time and estate to divert others and contemn the dirty acres left him by his ancestors, I do not think you will much care he should be a *poet* or that his schoolmaster should enter him in versifying. But yet, if anyone will think poetry a desirable quality in his son, and that the study of it would raise his fancy and parts, he must needs yet confess that to that end reading the excellent Greek and Roman poets is of more use than making bad verses of his own in a language that is not his own. And he whose design it is to excel in English poetry would not, I guess, think the way to it were to make his first essays in Latin verses.

*Memoriter.* §175. Another thing very ordinary in the vulgar method of grammar schools there is of which I see no use at all, unless it be to balk young lads in the way to learning languages, which, in my opinion, should be made as easy and pleasant as may be and that which was painful in it as much as possible quite removed. That which I mean and here complain of is their being forced to learn by heart great parcels of the authors which are taught

89. The Greek mountain sacred to the muses.

them; wherein I can discover no advantage at all, especially to the business they are upon. Languages are to be learned only by reading and talking and not by scraps of authors got by heart; which when a man's head is stuffed with, he has got the just furniture of a pedant, and 'tis the ready way to make him one, than which there is nothing less becoming a gentleman. For what can be more ridiculous than to mix the rich and handsome thoughts and sayings of others with a deal of poor stuff of his own; which is thereby the more exposed and has no other grace in it nor will otherwise recommend the speaker than a threadbare russet coat would that was set off with large patches of scarlet and glittering brocade. Indeed, where a passage comes in the way whose matter is worth remembrance and the expression of it very close and excellent (as there are many such in the ancient authors), it may not be amiss to lodge it in the mind of young scholars and with such admirable strokes of those great masters sometimes exercise the memory of schoolboys. But their learning of their lessons by heart as they happen to fall out in their books, without choice or distinction, I know not what it serves for but to misspend their time and pains and give them a disgust and aversion to their books, wherein they find nothing but useless trouble.

§176. I hear it's said that children should be employed in getting things by heart to exercise and improve their memories. I could wish this were said with as much authority of reason as it is with forwardness of assurance, and that this practice were established upon good observation more than old custom. For it is evident that strength of memory is owing to a happy constitution and not to any habitual improvement got by exercise. 'Tis true, what the mind is intent upon and, for fear of letting it slip, often imprints afresh on itself by frequent reflection, that it is apt to retain, but still according to its own natural strength of retention. An impression made on beeswax or lead will not last so long as on brass or steel. Indeed, if it be renewed often, it may last the longer; but every new reflecting on it is a new impression, and it is from thence one is to reckon if one would know how long the mind retains it. But the learning pages of Latin by heart no more fits the memory for retention of anything else than the grav-ing of one sentence in lead makes it the more capable of retaining firmly any other characters. If such a sort of exercise of the memory were able to give it strength and improve our parts, players of all other people must needs have the best memories, and be the best company. But whether the scraps they have got into their head this way make them remember other things the better, and whether their parts be improved proportionably to the pains they have taken in getting by heart others' sayings, experience

will show. Memory is so necessary to all parts and conditions of life and so little is to be done without it, that we are not to fear it should grow dull and useless for want of exercise, if exercise would make it grow stronger. But I fear this faculty of the mind 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. And if Xerxes was able to call every common soldier by name in his army that consisted of no less than a hundred thousand men, I think it may be guessed he got not this wonderful ability by learning his lessons by heart when he was a boy. This method of exercising and improving the memory by toilsome repetitions without book of what they read is, I think, little used in the education of princes, which if it had that advantage [that] is talked of should be as little neglected in them as in the meanest schoolboys: princes having as much need of good memories as any men living and having generally an equal share in this faculty with other men, though it has never been taken care of this way. What the mind is intent upon and careful of, that it remembers best and for the reason mentioned above; to which, if method and order be joined, all is done, I think, that can be for the help of a weak memory; and he that will take any other way to do it, especially that of charging it with a train of other people's words, which he that learns cares not for, will, I guess, scarce find the profit answer half the time and pains employed in it.

I do not mean hereby that there should be no exercise given to children's memories. I think their memories should be employed, but not in learning by rote whole pages out of books, which the lesson being once said and that task over, are delivered up again to oblivion and neglected forever. This mends neither the memory nor the mind. What they should learn by heart out of authors, I have above mentioned;<sup>90</sup> and such wise and useful sentences being once given in charge to their memories, they should never be suffered to forget again but be often called to an account for them; whereby, besides the use those sayings may be to them in their future life, as so many good rules and observations, they will be taught to reflect often and bethink themselves what they have to remember, which is the only way to make the memory quick and useful. The custom of frequent reflection will keep their minds from running adrift and call their thoughts home from useless inattentive roving, and therefore, I think, it may do well, to give them something every day to remember, but something still that is in itself worth the remembering and what you would never have out

90. §175.

of mind whenever you call or they themselves search for it. This will oblige them often to turn their thoughts inward, than which you cannot wish them a better intellectual habit.

§177. But under whose care soever a child is put to be taught during the tender and flexible years of his life, this is certain: it should be one who thinks *Latin* and *language* the least part of education; one who, knowing how much virtue and a well-tempered soul is to be preferred to any sort of *learning* or *language*, makes it his chief business to form the mind of his scholars and give that a right disposition, which if once got, though all the rest should be neglected, would in due time produce all the rest and which, if it be not got and settled so as to keep out ill and vicious habits, *languages* and *sciences* and all the other accomplishments of education will be to no purpose but to make the worse or more dangerous man. And, indeed, whatever stir there is made about getting of *Latin* as the great and difficult business, his mother may teach it him herself if she will but spend two or three hours in a day with him and make him read the Evangelists in *Latin* to her: for she need but buy a *Latin* Testament and, having got somebody to mark the last syllable but one, where it is long, in words above two syllables (which is enough to regulate her pronunciation and accenting the words), read daily in the *Gospels*, and then let her avoid understanding them in *Latin* if she can. And when she understands the Evangelists in *Latin*, let her in the same manner read Aesop's *Fables*, and so proceed on to Eutropius, Justin, and other such books. I do not mention this as an imagination of what I fancy [one] may do, but as of a thing I have known done and the *Latin* tongue with ease got this way.

But to return to what I was saying: he that takes on him the charge of bringing up young men, especially young gentlemen, should have something more in him than *Latin*, more than even a knowledge in the liberal sciences; he should be a person of eminent virtue and prudence, and with good sense, have good humor, and the skill to carry himself with gravity, ease, and kindness in a constant conversation with his pupils. But of this I have spoken at large in another place.<sup>91</sup>

§178. At the same time that he is learning French and Latin, a child, *Geography*. as has been said,<sup>92</sup> may also be entered in *arithmetic*, *geography*, *chronology*, *history*, and *geometry* too. For if these be taught him in French or Latin when he begins once to understand either of these tongues, he will get a knowledge in these sciences and the language to boot.

91. §§88-94.

92. §166.