

**REMARKS ON
NATIONAL
EDUCATION**

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Remarks on National Education by George Combe

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GEORGE COMBE

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THE public appear to be now nearly unanimous on the point, that the people *should be educated*; but considerable differences of opinion exist as to *who* should be charged with the duty of educating them,—the state or individuals? also whether combined religious and secular instruction, or secular instruction alone, should be given by the schoolmaster, leaving religious instruction to be supplied by the parent and priest. To communicate my views distinctly on these points, I find it advisable to begin with the very elements of the subject.

In the arguments generally maintained on these questions, certain views of the nature of man; of the origin and objects of society; of the powers and duties of government; and of the connection between practical morality, secular prosperity, and religious belief, are assumed by the various writers as settled doctrines, concerning which their own opinions are unquestionably sound; when, in point of fact, no adequate consideration has been bestowed on these topics, either by them or by those to whom they address themselves, and no common views in regard to them are definitely assented to by either. When the postulates of a discussion are thus involved in obscurity, and apprehended differently by different individuals, harmony in the conclusions is impossible. However widely, therefore, the reader may differ from some of the opinions now to be stated, few persons, I hope, will doubt the advantage of elucidating these fundamental points of the question.

This world, then, appears to me to be a vast theatre constituted for exertion; in which enjoyment is the natural consequence of industry, morality, and intelligence; and suffering that of ignorance, vice, and sloth. The constitution of the world, physical and moral, that of the human mind and body, as well as the relations between them, are fixed and determinate; and man becomes prosperous and happy in proportion to the degree in which his social institutions and per-

sonal conduct harmonize with these unchangeable elements of nature. Each individual of the race is born ignorant of every thing; but capacities are bestowed on him to learn all that is essential to his welfare. The mighty machinery of nature, physical and moral, is constantly revolving within him (in his own mind and body), and around him; and he cannot by possibility avoid experiencing its influence. To be prosperous, he must adjust his conduct and position to its action, and he cannot do so unless he know it; learn, therefore, he must, or suffer. Education means teaching the individual what it concerns him to know relative to his own constitution and that of the moral and physical world in which he is destined to live and act; and it includes *training* him to habits of action suitable to that destination.

The importance of teaching knowledge is evident; but the necessity for *training* is less understood. It arises from the dependence of the mind, in this world, on physical organization for its powers of acting. The brain is the material instrument by means of which the minds acts, and it consists of a variety of parts, each connected with a special mental power. It is subject to the same organic laws as the other parts of the body. If we should confine a man for the first twenty years of his life to a dungeon, without exercise and employment, we should find, on bringing him into the active world of light and life, that he could not see distinctly, could not judge correctly of the distance of objects by their sounds, could not walk steadily, and scarcely could make any exertion with his arms and hands. The cause of his defects would be found in the circumstance, that his organic structure had been left feeble and undeveloped through want of exercise; and that his various senses and muscles (which, although distinct in themselves, are all framed to co-operate and assist in prosecuting general aims) had never been accustomed to act in combination. Such a being, therefore, when first introduced into active life, would be helpless, bewildered, and unhappy.

The uneducated and untrained peasant is in a similar condition in regard to his mental organs. Not only is he ignorant, but his mental organs are dull, feeble, and incapable of continued exertion; and he, therefore, cannot think continuously, or act perseveringly. We may give him instruction, but it does not penetrate into his inactive brain, and it is not reproductive of thought and action. I have occasionally hired into my service individuals who have not learned to read and write, and the effects were most conspicuous. The ears heard, and the eyes saw, and the understanding appeared to

comprehend ; but I soon discovered that the comprehension was imperfect and inexact, that the *retention* was momentary, and the power of reproduction, combination, and modification, almost *nil*. I lately conversed with an engineer and machine-maker who employs 120 workmen, and he told me that he had repeatedly taken into his workshop uneducated and untrained labourers with a view to teaching them some simple processes in his trade, but had found that the lesson of yesterday was not retained in the mind till to-day ; that no spontaneous suggestion presented itself, even when circumstances rendered it evident to a trained understanding ; and that their labour, in consequence, was without value in any department of skilled art. Their muscles had been trained to act, almost without the direction of their brains ; and beyond labour which muscles could execute independently of intelligence, they were powerless.

Such is the intellectual condition of uneducated man. But the intellect constitutes only a small, although an important portion of the mind : Man is endowed, besides, with moral sentiments and animal propensities, depending, like his intellect, on cerebral organs for their powers of manifestation. Each organ is more or less capable of action in proportion to its size, temperament, and the *training* which it has received. In a rude and uncultivated condition of the intellect, the moral sentiments are left without stimulus and direction. These sentiments produce the emotions of benevolence and veneration, and the love of justice. Prosperous external circumstances, generally speaking, are favourable to their development. A man steeped in poverty and oppressed by want, finds his selfish faculties excited, and lacks not only moral stimulus, but physical means for practising the benevolent virtues. One buried in ignorance cannot exercise a well directed and enlightened veneration ; and one in whom all the higher and disinterested powers of the mind are dormant, cannot be expected to comprehend the dictates of truth, or to practise the principles of justice.

But the third class of faculties, the animal propensities, are not equally quiescent in the uneducated individual ; because, on their prompt action, the preservation of life and the supply of our bodily wants have been made by nature immediately to depend. The external objects which act as their stimulants, everywhere abound. The struggle for food, raiment, and shelter, in which the uneducated man is, in the general case, constantly engaged, calls forth his Combative-ness and Destructiveness, his cunning and his obstinacy,

into abiding activity; it *trains them* to vigour, and renders them prompt to action.

Such, then, is uneducated man, in his general condition. I speak, of course, of average individuals, for there are persons born in all ranks of life whose inherent superiority of mind enables them triumphantly to surmount every adventitious obstacle to their development and elevation. These, however, are few in number; and as nature has rendered them, in a great measure, independent of social aid, they do not form the objects of our present consideration.

Let us next consider *society*, and its origin and objects. I regard society as the direct offspring of the inherent faculties of man. Some species of animals are gregarious, that is to say, have received from the God of Nature certain feelings which render the presence of their kind agreeable to them; and to this category belongs man. Many of our faculties have intelligent beings for their direct objects; and all of them are adapted to a condition of social life. Not only so, but also the grand outlines of the social state of man are determined by the fiat of the Creator. Individuals differ *naturally* in bodily strength and in mental energy; and in these differences a foundation is laid for diversities of social rank and condition—for the existence of the rich and the poor, of the governing and the governed. In order correctly to understand human nature, therefore, we must regard man as an *individual* being, seeking his happiness in the gratification of his faculties; but high in the list of these we must place his social powers, which are as certainly inherent parts of his mental constitution as the most important of his selfish feelings.

Government springs from the social faculties. Living in the social state, necessarily implies that there are interests and duties common to all the members of the tribe. Gregarious animals place sentinels to warn the herd or flock of dangers, and choose leaders to guide them. Among men, the ruling power, in its proper form, consists merely of certain members of the associated mass selected by the rest to attend to the common interests of the whole, and to enforce the reciprocal duties incumbent on the individual and the community. General consent of the members selects the Rulers, and lends them the power of the social body to execute their functions. History tells us, indeed, that, in many states, strong and energetic individuals have constituted themselves masters and transmitted their power to their descendants, irrespective of the will of the community; whence notions have grown up of the right to govern being inherent in certain families,

independently of the will of the people: but these were usurpations disavowed by reason, and such claims are not now made by the rulers of any constitutional state, and certainly not by the Government of England.

In determining what are the rights of individuals, and what the powers of Government, our best guide is still the nature of man. Man subsists necessarily as an *individual*: He has received from his Maker certain powers of action and enjoyment, and been placed in a world adapted to his constitution. He has a right, therefore, derived directly from God (who called him into existence, and provided the world for his reception), to the full enjoyment of all his powers and capacities, but under two restrictions; *1st*, that he shall not transgress the laws which Divine wisdom has established in his own and in external nature for their regulation; and, *2dly*, that he shall not convert his individual enjoyments into sources of annoyance to his fellow-men, who, from the necessity of his and their being, must live with him in society. God, in his government of the world, enforces the first restriction by punishing the individual with loss of health for abuse of his corporeal functions, and by misfortune and misery for neglect or abuse of his mental powers. The *duty* and the *right* of Government is to enforce the second restriction, viz., to see that the individual, in pursuing his own happiness, does not invade that of his neighbours.

These premises enable us to draw certain conclusions regarding the right of our Rulers to interfere in the education of the people. In the first place, it follows from them, that if any man chooses to renounce all connection with and dependence on society,—to go forth from the haunts of men, and neither live among them, accept their aid, nor tender them his contributions, physical or mental,—he has an undoubted right, so far as society is concerned, to indulge *all* his faculties in his own way, because he commits no offence against society, and causes it no injury. He commits, indeed, a great offence against his own nature, which the Creator expressly designed for social life; but Nature herself, without the interference of man as an avenger, has provided ample punishment for that offence, by the deterioration of his social nature, and the deprivation of all social enjoyments, consequent on solitude. Betake himself to what solitude he will, he cannot escape out of the presence of God, or withdraw himself from the influence of *His* laws, which are woven into the texture of his body and mind, and inscribed on every breath of air, and every foot of ground. By their means, the Creator will inflict on him the precise kind and degree of

punishment which his conduct merits, and which will best serve to recall him to a due estimate of the privileges which he contemns.

But when an individual prefers to avail himself of the advantages of living in society, of the physical protection which other men's skill and courage afford, of the social pleasures which their intelligence and attainments present, and above all, when he claims their sympathy, support, and relief in sickness and in old age—which every man living in society virtually does—he becomes bound to perform his duty to it in return; and society acquires a *right* to enforce the performance of that duty, as the fundamental condition on which it allows him to reap the benefit of its arrangements and institutions.

What, then, are the duties which the individual owes to society? His first duty, in compensation for the advantages it confers on him, is obviously to acquire bodily habits calculated, according to the laws of organization, which neither he nor society can alter, to preserve himself in health, that he may be fitted for his allotted sphere of action, and may avoid diffusing disease by infection around him. It is on this principle that society has the right to enforce the ordinary regulations of police in towns. It ordains every citizen to put forth from his dwelling all refuse and noxious substances, and employs men to collect and carry them away. This is not done in the country, because there, individuals who neglect this duty, injure only themselves and their domestic dependents. The same principle will authorise the enforcement of still higher hygienic regulations in towns; and, in point of fact, the statute 9th and 10th Victoria, c. 96, recently passed, authorises the magistrates of towns, on receiving a certificate signed by two duly qualified medical practitioners, "of the filthy and unwholesome condition of any dwelling-house or other building," to *compel* the person complained of to abate the nuisance within two days. But I may go further in the same direction. The individual who claims the benefits afforded by an advanced and intelligent state of society, is bound to qualify himself, according to the endowments bestowed on him by Providence, for acting well his part in that society. In a society which is moral, he has no right to continue publicly immoral; because this is not only offensive, but directly injurious to his fellow-men: he is not entitled to remain ignorant and untrained; because in that condition he is incapable of performing his due part in the grand social evolutions, the beneficial results of which he claims a right to share. Before he can consistently deny the right of society to train and edu-

cate his children, he must shew his own title to make the following announcement, viz., "I decline to undergo the fatigue and discipline necessary to render my brain active, in order to fit myself for skilful labour, and for applying my labour to the best advantage; I decline to learn to read and write; I decline to be instructed in, or to conform my conduct to, those conditions in the physical and moral world, which, by the ordination of God, are productive of prosperity and happiness; and I decline to regulate my conduct by what you call the laws of morality and reason; all this I decline, because I am a free and independent man, and because it would be irksome to me to submit to such training, instruction, and restraint;—nevertheless, I claim the right to throw myself with all my incapacity undiminished, all my ignorance unilluminated, and all my passions unregulated and untamed, upon the bosom of society: I insist that its members who *have* cultivated *their* faculties and reaped the natural rewards of that cultivation, in the possession of morality, intelligence, and wealth, shall bear the burden of my incapacity, of my recklessness, and of my follies; that they shall minister to me when sick, and feed me when my unskilled labour, in competition with their skilled labour, does not suffice to supply me with the necessaries of life; and that they shall provide for my wife and children when, through ignorance and vice, I sink into a premature grave."

This embodies, not a rhetorical, but a *literal* statement of the demand which the untrained and uneducated labourer, who denies the right of society to insist that himself and his children be trained and educated, makes on his fellow-men; and I leave those to defend it who abet him in that denial. The man who claims the benefit of a poor-law, actually demands from society all that I have now mentioned; and, unquestionably, we are entitled to say to him,—“Before you can legitimately claim ignorance as the sacred birthright of yourself and your offspring, you must shew your emancipation from the laws of God, which connect want with incapacity, misfortune with ignorance, misery with immorality, and disease and premature death with habits of filth, sloth, and intemperance.” If the man admits that he continues a subject of the Divine government (and unless he be mad he will not dispute this point), he cannot, with any show of reason, contest the right of society to train and instruct him and his children to that degree which shall render him and them moral and intelligent agents, fit to play their parts in the society of which they claim to be members.

The question here presents itself, *What kind and degree of*