

**FACTS AND ARGUMENTS ON THE
TRANSMISSION OF
INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL
QUALITIES FROM PARENTS TO
OFFSPRING**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649580507

Facts and Arguments on the Transmission of Intellectual and Moral Qualities from Parents to Offspring by Hester Pendleton

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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HESTER PENDLETON

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EVERY century, since the revival of literature, appears to have been occupied in discovering and establishing some new and important truth. The power and application of steam in physics, and the discovery and confirmation of phrenology in metaphysics, have been the principal objects of interest in the present century. The former has multiplied power to an incalculable extent, and almost annihilated time and space; whilst the latter has scarcely advanced further than to disclose to man the nature and extent of his sentiments, passions, and intellect. But to what great and important results this science is destined to lead, time only can unfold. It has, however, already made

known to those who will see by its light, not only the certainty, but also the means of perpetuating talent and virtue from parent to offspring. This subject, possibly, will occupy the attention of the twentieth century; and so general is the belief in the omnipotence of education, that it may require a whole century to apply its truths to the practical elevation of the race. For there are many persons even in this enlightened age, who believe with Helvetius, that all men are born with equal mental capacities, and that education and circumstances develop genius or stifle it. "To which opinion," says Carlyle, "I should as soon agree as to this other, that an acorn might, by favorable or unfavorable influence of soil or climate, be nursed into a cabbage, or the cabbage-seed into an oak. Nevertheless, I, too, acknowledge the all but omnipotence of early culture and nurture; thereby we have either a doddard dwarf-bush, or high-towering wide-shadowing tree; either a sick yellow cabbage or an edible, luxuriant, green one."

Mr. Goodrich, in his work on education, says, "For my own part, I believe there are great discoveries yet to be made on this subject, hacknied as it may seem, and these are doubtless to result from a more thorough understanding of childhood. I would, therefore, commend the study of children, not to the parent alone, but to all, as they are an interesting and important theme of philosophical inquiry. The chemist delves deep in search of hidden acids and alkalies; the botanist climbs to the Alps or the Andes, in pursuit of rare flowers; the mineralogist plunges into caverns, and treads the dizzy edge of the precipice in his eager chase after new minerals. I refer

the reader to a more fruitful source of the wonderful and the beautiful, the study of childhood." And may not this, the most neglected of all studies, if properly pursued, lead to discoveries of greater importance than mere improvement in education?

Too frequently the discouraging conviction is forced upon the mind of the most competent teacher, that his best efforts are thrown away; and that it is impossible to make any abiding impression on the undeveloped brain of his weak-minded vacillating pupil. He, therefore, perceives a much greater necessity for improving the natural disposition and capability of children, for acquiring knowledge, than for any improvement in the mode of imparting it. And when he observes the ease and facility with which the naturally strong-minded and energetic imbibe learning, he is confirmed in his opinion, and deeply regrets the carelessness and indifference of parents on this most important subject.

Talent, or genius, is now universally admitted to be natural gift. How important then, to ascertain the manner by which it can be perpetuated?—"The variable talents of the mind," says Dr. Good, "are as propagable as the various features of the body—how, or by what means, we know not, but the fact is incontrovertible. Wit and dullness, genius and idiotism, run in direct streams from generation to generation; and hence the moral characters of families, of tribes, and of whole nations." Yet, that there are fixed laws which govern the transmission of intellectual and moral qualities, is less safe to doubt, than that such laws have been discovered.

In the biography of eminent men, great care has gene-

ally been taken to show at what school or college they were educated, under what able professor, and the particular course of study pursued. Yet how unimportant are these facts, when we reflect, that a vast number of men, of only common capacities, pass through the same college, under the same able professors, and pursue the same course of study, without having been raised above mediocrity? The inference then is, that the biographer must go farther back than education, to elicit the true cause which produced this pre-eminence in the subject of his memoir. And to what glorious results might not such inquiry lead? What bounds shall we set to the career of mental and physical improvement which it would open to the race of man? Whoso shall establish the practicability of such improvement, will bestow upon the world the choicest legacy genius ever bequeathed to humanity.*

When we look back upon the last hundred years, and there behold the great truths which have been discovered and established by wisdom and science, both in the material and the immaterial world, who will presume to prescribe bounds to the future investigations of the human intellect, and say, "thus far shalt thou go, but no farther?" Particularly if it be true, "that the great and wise Creator gave man his peculiar reasoning faculties for the purpose that uni-

* "He who can convince the world of the importance of the laws of hereditary descent, and induce mankind to conduct themselves accordingly, will do more good to them, and contribute more to their improvement, than all institutions and all systems of education."—(*Spurzheim's Views of Education.*)

versally, and as well *here as elsewhere*, he might acquire the direction of events, by discovering the laws regulating their successions."

In the seclusion of his study, from his observation of men, and from his own consciousness, man endeavours to explain the phenomena of the diversity of human intellect; by which means he often involves the subject in a more inextricable maze than he found it. Whereas, if, instead of the closet and the forum, he were to go into the nursery, and study nature at her fountain-head, endeavouring to trace to the true cause, the diversity of disposition and character he found there, he would be much more likely to arrive at the truth than by any other method. He must, however, take the mother to his council, for she only can explain that which to the observer would appear a mystery;—not a trait of character, not a propensity, not a peculiarity of any kind, but the mother knows, or ought to know, how it originated.

Where is the parent who has indured the heart-burning occasioned by the waywardness of children, or the agony of soul, suffered by their constant pursuit in vicious courses, with the conviction continually forcing itself on his mind, that evil and not good is innate in them, that would not have hailed as a messenger from heaven, a voice which could have warned him how to avoid much of this misery? Yet there is such a voice audible throughout all animated nature—else this world were not the creation of an all-wise omnipotence.

Mr. Combe says, that if the same amount of knowledge and care which has been taken to improve the domestic animals, had been bestowed upon the human species, during the last century, there would not have been so great a number of moral patients for the lunatic asylums and the prisons, as there are at present. That the human species are as susceptible of improvement as the domestic animals, who can deny? Then, is it not strange, that man, possessing so much information on this subject, and acknowledging the laws which govern such matters, should lose sight of those laws in perpetuating his own species? Yet, how extremely short-sighted is that individual, who, in forming a matrimonial connection, overlooks the important consideration of the quality of the physical and mental constitution which his children will be likely to inherit? (a) And also, that a great portion of the happiness or misery of his future life, will depend upon the conduct of those children; and, again, that their manifestations, whether good or evil, will be the effect of the mental, moral and physical organization which they inherit.* The time is fast approaching when men will pay more attention to this subject, for it is certain, that the acknowledged utility of the science of phrenology, is taking deep root, by which these matters can be tested; the parent will, consequently, no longer be pitied for the immoral conduct

* "The laws of hereditary descent should be attended to, not only with respect to organic life, but also to the manifestations of mind, since these depend on the nervous system. There are many examples on record, of certain feelings, or intellectual

of his child, but the child will rather be commiserated for having inherited active animal propensities, accompanied by deficient moral and reflecting organs.

Impressed with the importance of these views, the natural dispositions and capabilities of children, whether inherited or produced by favorable or unfavorable circumstances, (operating on the parents previous to the birth,) became to the writer a subject of the deepest interest. From observation, it appeared, that

powers, being inherited in whole families. Now, if it be ascertained that the hereditary condition of the brain is the cause, there is a great additional motive to be careful in the choice of a partner in marriage. No person of sense can be indifferent about having selfish or benevolent, stupid, or intelligent children.

An objection may be made against the doctrine of hereditary effects resulting from the laws of propagation, viz: that in large families there are individuals of very different capacities.

This observation shows at least that the children are born with different dispositions, and it proves nothing against the laws of propagation. The young ones of animals that propagate indiscriminately, are very different; but when the races are pure, and all conditions attended to, the nature of the young can be determined beforehand. As long as the races of mankind are mixed, their progeny must vary extremely. But let persons of determinate dispositions breed in and in, and the races will become distinct. Moreover, the condition of the mother is commonly less valued than it ought to be. It is, however, observed, that boys commonly resemble their mother, and girls their father; and that men of great talents generally descend from intelligent mothers. But as long as eminent men are marrying to partners of inferior capacities, the qualities of the offspring must be uncertain. The Arabs seem to understand the great importance of females, since they do not allow to sell females to foreigners, and note the nobility of their horse after the females."—(*Spurzheim's View of Education*).