

**FORMAL  
DISCIPLINE,  
PP. 8-77**

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Formal Discipline, pp. 8-77 by Charles J. C. Bennett

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FORMAL DISCIPLINE

BY

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with what—water color, oil, or pastel? Now these narrow questions are not what the advocate of formal discipline puts. He takes the larger words as exponential of character, like "well-trained mind," and holds that the particular actions are simply the outcome in certain directions of that general mental attitude.

And the result on the side of education, both in theory and practice, is apparent. Any subject which exercises the student is as good as any other, or, if there is any difference, it is one of degree. The remoteness of the subject from the life which the student is to follow is of no importance, whether this remoteness relates to the subject matter, the method of getting that subject matter, or the accomplishment effected by the study. Though one were to be a Christian in adult life in morals and religion, the study of pagan literature was as generally helpful in that direction as the study of Jewish literature, for after all it gave the general things called "culture," "outlook." The same was held to be true of history, so that even yet modern history occupies a very subordinate place, if any at all, in most of the high schools, which are thinking more especially of the mental development of the student as opposed to the college which has more nearly in mind the nearness of practical life. Indeed, the great argument for the classics, for geometry, for algebra, in the older courses, and later for the introduction of botany, physics and astronomy, and still later for drawing, nature study and manual training, has been in more or less explicit form the dogma of formal discipline, *i. e.*, that each of these are generally helpful to the mind as such, or, one grade removed from this, are productive of ready memory, keen perception, accurate reason, lively imagination. Such words or phrases as "intellectual power," "moral training," "mental force," "fibre," "taste," "character," "disposition" are the ends of school training.

*Extent of Belief in and Practice According to the Doctrine.* The Greeks held in theory, as well as in practice, to the theory of general training. Plato conceived of a kind of dance which would not only bring out all the desirable characteristics of the body, but likewise those of the mind. Their whole training

would be largely of the character called culture by us today. However, the life of the Greek referred to by Plato, as by Aristotle, was that of one of the upper classes only, who was supported by slaves, and was thus allowed to disport himself in an easy and untechnical way in politics or art, or conversations about everything under the sun. Thus there was a closer unity between the matter and method of the school and of after life than at first appears. But with the appearance of Scholasticism, formal discipline started on a career of centuries. All one needed was a training in logic, in intellectual gymnastics, and from this source of knowledge, the inner consciousness, could be spun out all good and worthy things. This notion fixed logic in the course for all these passing years. Latin and the classics generally were studied in the middle ages for the knowledge they contained, and that only as mentioned above; but as the other tongues developed literatures, they were continued partly by the force of traditional inertia, and partly on account of their supposed disciplinary value. Coming on to our own day, the advocates of even such seemingly practical subjects as manual training, including cooking, sewing, and gardening, either in deference to the customary justification of school subjects, or to some really supposed logical connection, take special pains to say that these things are not introduced for their practical value; far from it, they are simply to achieve more effectively than did the old list those points of general culture, and the whetting up of the so-called faculties, as memory, imagination, reason, etc. The advocates of nature study say that it helps to better observation, in respect to both the number of things observed and the acuteness of the process. Their favorite phrase is, "It trains in observation," and their general position is that it does not make much, if any, difference what is observed, so long as that mental function is performed. With some view to the study of the law in my earlier days, I was repeatedly advised to study mathematics that my mind might be trained into accurate, well balanced, logical and exhaustive methods. On the other side, law is often studied in general courses for its cross effects in avenues in no ways legal.<sup>1</sup>)

<sup>1</sup>Leland Stanford, Jr., University lately opposed an Act before the California Legislature to free her graduates in law from the bar examinations on the ground that her purpose was not directly to prepare lawyers.

This position on formal discipline is clearly revealed in all that very large class of people in this country who send their children to private military schools, which are in no sense preparatory to West Point. These parents are avowedly not thinking of their sons becoming warriors, and it is often the very boys who are sent to these schools who are in no special mood for soldierly service and care little for the drills which they are compelled to undergo. But the patent declarations of these schools are that the students learn respect for law, obedience, promptness, attention to duty and to details, courage, patriotism, and all the host of things which skill in precise conformity to law and authority bring. The same principle lies at the base of much of the militarism of the public schools in their marching here and there, keeping in line, "heads up, eyes to the front," the slipping, sliding and starting at "one, two, three," etc., *ad infinitum*. So also in many institutions for orphans and the like, in which the lights go out at this time, rising bells ring at another, everything working according to machinery and mathematics. All this is done not for the reason or even expectation that the children will do these same things in after life; for the leaders of these schools show by their own actions, as well as by confession, that these are not the ways of life. But such training teaches the children to do the things they are not to do in the right way, at the right time, etc. Indeed, there are two implicit articles in this creed: first, that the child will learn to do the right thing—I mean here the right act, *e. g.*, going out of a theater properly,—by *not* doing that thing, but something else; second, that the child will be best prepared for certain things not only by not doing those things, but indeed by doing nothing about them or at all related to them. That is, by this life of negation, greater capacity will be acquired for positive action later on. I wish to repeat for emphasis that whatever good or evil exists in the convents, cloistral schools, and all others with walls about them, is a direct outcome of the notion or doctrine of formal discipline, stated from its negative side. It clearly implies that the building up of the organism in one way—for living things keep changing and growing—will be the most effective preparation



for actions depending on habits in no way comparable to those earlier formed.

A later form of the doctrine of formal discipline, approved in high circles, is in connection with the new system of electives in our colleges and universities. The administrators of these institutions disavow any connection with professional schools or trade schools as such, holding that it does not make much difference what the student takes so that he takes it well; *i. e.*, it makes no difference what his business or calling after he leaves the university will be, a thorough course in one thing being about as good as another. There is apparently the belief that this one elected subject, rightly pursued, will give the student something which will carry over into any or all fields whatsoever.

The following citations are given to illustrate the statements just made and to indicate the use made of the word "discipline."

The type of instruction should be disciplinary rather than practical.<sup>1</sup>

The mind is chiefly developed in three ways: by cultivating the powers of discriminating observation; by strengthening the logical faculty; and by improving the powers of comparison. As studies in languages and in the natural sciences are best adapted to cultivate the habit of observation; as mathematics are the traditional training of the reasoning faculties, so history and its allied branches are better adapted than any other studies to promote the invaluable mental power which we call judgment.<sup>2</sup>

This same committee, including among others, Charles W. Eliot, Wm. T. Harris, and James B. Angell, say:

On the theory that all the subjects are to be considered equivalent in educational rank for the purpose of admission to college, it would make no difference which subjects he had chosen from the programme—he would have had four years of strong and effective mental training.<sup>3</sup>

To this James H. Baker objects as it ignores "Philosophy, Psychology, and the Science of Education."<sup>4</sup>

Arithmetic, if it deserves the high place it conventionally holds in the educational system, deserves it mainly on the ground that it is to be treated as a *logical exercise*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>W. H. Payne, *Contributions to the Science of Education*, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Report of the Committee of Ten, U. S. Bureau of Education, 1892, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup>Report of the Committee of Ten, U. S. Bureau of Education, 1892, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Bain, *Education as a Science*, p. 152.

Arithmetic, when taught with this in mind—the notion of logical method—gives to the pupil not knowledge of facts alone, but that which transcends such knowledge, namely, power.<sup>1</sup>

Value of technical instruction, that which regards hand and eye training *per se* as an essential part of human culture.<sup>2</sup>

During dictation (exercises) the child can get no chance to play, sleep, be idle, or do mischief. The process is the best and most perfect drill for order.<sup>3</sup>

The fiction of formal education (Bildung) must be given up. In general there exist simply as many kinds of formal education as there are essentially different phases of intellectual employment.<sup>4</sup>

For the training of this power of observation, it does not matter what subject the child studies, so that he study something thoroughly in an observational method. If the method be right, it does not matter among the numerous subjects well fitted to develop this important faculty, which he choose or which be chosen for him.<sup>5</sup>

Mathematics does furnish the power for deliberate thought and accurate statement, and to speak the truth is one of the most social qualities a person can possess.<sup>6</sup>

Mathematics no more teaches reasoning in the ordinary sense than traveling by railroad fits a man for exploring in Central Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing is better for developing gradually, and methodically, all the intellectual faculties of children than the study of grammar and literature. They exercise memory, sagacity, taste, judgment—under all its forms.<sup>8</sup>

H. Sidgwick quotes the above and assents to it in essays on a Liberal Education, but feels it somewhat too sweeping.

By cultivating the Greek and Roman languages we acquire skill in all mental operations. The study of mathematics ranks next in importance and furnishes an excellent training to the faculties.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Smith, *The Teaching of Elementary Mathematics*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Fitch, *Educational Aims and Methods*, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup>Manual for Public School, 1850, p. 158.

<sup>4</sup>Rein, *Outlines of Pedagogics*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Eliot, *Forum*, 1892, p. 428.

<sup>6</sup>Dutton, *Social Phases of Education*, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup>J. M. Wilson, Master of Rugby, *Essays on Literary Education*, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>M. Cournot, *De l'Instruction Publique*.

<sup>9</sup>Paulsen, on the stated purpose of the Gymnasia.  
Russell, *Higher German Schools*, p. 74.

## PART I

### EVIDENCE FROM ANALYTIC PSYCHOLOGY

*Analysis of the Doctrine of Formal Discipline.* One of the reasons for the differences among people about the truth of the doctrine of formal discipline is the different meanings assigned to the phrase and to the other phrases used for the meaning. The Germans call it formal "Bildung," or formal education; it is also called formal training. While the second word in each case has a slightly different implication, they are at one in the emphasis of the formal element as opposed to the content feature. The following are some of the meanings which it has in actual use: First, it refers to the increase in general capacity of the whole mind when exercised in a definite way. The mind is supposed to possess as a unity mental energy, force, power, spiritual unity; it is a whole and homogeneous substance, without parts or phases. It may be compared to a tank of a simple gas: invisible, simple, active, possessing a unity of direct contact, as well as of function. A man who inadvertently uses the word "faculties" will hasten to say that he believes in a mental oneness. Under this position, a man trains his mind, and that is all there is to it. One person may do it in one way, and another in a different way, but the goal is the same: mental energy or sharpness results. Volkmann's statement that "whatever remains isolated, doesn't enter into development," is both true and false—true in that no such separate thing could be a real mental addition, but false in that there could be no such isolated knowledge. And strangely enough this thesis of spiritual power has come largely as a reaction against the faculty psychology, ignoring the truth of the Wolfian position in its efforts to show its falsities. But they have largely the same outcome for education: they both make a large opening for the generalized effects of special training. This point on its psychological side will be taken up later.