

Some Thoughts on Education John Locke

Surprisingly modern in almost every respect - a delight to read

This is amazingly accessible for a book written 320 years ago. A small bit of his vocabulary is archaic, and his delivery is more wordy than is common in modern prose. Still, today's reader will find interest in the ideas, not just the book's place in history.

To place him in history, Locke's life spanned the last three quarters of the 17th century. He followed the scientific revolution initiated by Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton, whom he admired, and the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. An early philosopher, he predated Burke, Hume, Voltaire and Rousseau by about a century.

While Locke was a doctor, certainly the worst advice in the book has to do with medicine. Although the scientific revolution had begun, it had not progressed to the point of evidence-based theories of disease. As one example, Locke proposes that his upper-class readers put their children in thin cloaks and shoes, so they will be toughened by exposure to cold. No thought of isolating them from bugs.

Fully half of the book used dedicated to the moral and ethical formation of a child. He discourses at length on what to do about children who lie, daydream, are cruel to animals, are querulous (froward), inattentive, rude, bashful and otherwise imperfectly formed in character. He is very classic in his view that one must educate the whole child. In fact, he only gets around to talking about academic subjects in the last fifth of the book, opening with the quote " Learning. -- You will wonder, perhaps, that I put learning last, especially if I tell you I think it the least part."

Before getting to academics, he addresses dancing, which he believes is useful to a child in many ways; music, which he thinks is not worth the considerable time it takes to master; drawing, which he thinks is a skill every gentleman should possess; swimming, which is salubrious for the health and can save your life; fencing and horseback riding, which are essential gentlemanly skills.

Young children need to learn how to read and write. It is important that they learn naturally. Being forced to learn can sour the experience for them and get their whole academic career off to an unfortunate start. Children should be surrounded by reading and writing, and be led to exercise them for pleasure.

In this context, children should not be asked to read texts that are beyond their appropriate level of difficulty, or that are foreign to the child's natural interests. He specifically says that any attempt to read the Bible in order would be seriously misplaced. Children should be taught the essential Bible stories such as the story of creation, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in the lion's den and so forth in a simple form and in such a way that they tell a moral. In other words, children should be familiar with the Bible as a cultural touchstone of Christian society.

Locke was surprisingly modern in his religious views. Rather like the philosophes who followed him and the deists who established the American government, he thought that the Christian religion was a good thing even though he says that there are some items of faith that simply cannot bear scientific investigation. Familiar with gravity from Newton's work, he posited that the great flood might have been caused by a shift in the Earth's center of gravity. But he quickly says that this is the kind of inquiry we ought not to undertake; there is a clear divide between the worlds of natural science and religion, and we make a mistake if we confound the two.

Then on to academics. Foreign languages are important in the measure that a person will use them in life. That is saying, the ability to speak a living language is a considerable asset. Knowledge of grammar, he believed, is not nearly so important. Latin is not worth the time that was usually given to it in his age, and Greek is important only for the professional scholar.

Locke believed the geography and history were very important. He also believed, contrary to my experience with modern students, that they are intrinsically interesting. He believed that every person should master arithmetic, geometry, and rhetoric. Memorizing long passages in foreign languages, however, and writing poetry he characterizes as fruitless wastes of time, the development of life skills that are simply not remunerative for most people.

Concluding his advice on academics, Locke went on to say that the child should be familiar with the manual skills, the crafts such as carpentry, gardening and the like. He advocated that learning manual skills is essential in mental development. He recommended that a child learn bookkeeping, inasmuch as he would someday be in the position of managing an estate.

The whole book is written with a great sense of humanity. Locke treats the child as an adult in the process of formation, fully worthy of dignity, not to be beaten or dominated in any way for any purpose other than character development. Locke supports corporal punishment, but only as a last resort, only when authorized by the father, and only upon occasion, to reinforce a specific instruction. His philosophy is quite consistent with the practice in American schools even through the 1960s or 1970s, when Benjamin Spock was ascendant, until the principle of individual responsibility faded as therapeutic schools of child rearing became ascendant. Put another way, Locke believed firmly in free will. Every child is a moral actor, responsible for his own actions, and it is the responsibility of the parent to develop that moral character.

I leave it to other reviewers to recite the ways in which Locke's views tie out to those of Aristotle and his other philosophical precursors. To me the news is in how well he outlined the path going forward from his era into our own.