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MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, *ON THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN* (1575)¹

Born near Bordeaux, France, to a family of rich merchants and aristocrats, some descended from converted Jews, Michel De Montaigne (1533–92) had an unusual upbringing for his time. At a young age, he was awoken by soft music, taught Latin by tutors who spoke only that language to him, and never beaten. He then attended an excellent boarding school where he received the highest quality humanistic education. Though devoted throughout his life to study and learning, he nevertheless served two terms as mayor of Bordeaux.

Constantly writing and rewriting essays on the widest range of topics, he collected them into three books, which both popularized the essay form in Western literature and had a powerful impact on many subsequent Western thinkers. Above all, Montaigne exhibits an unstinting skepticism toward nearly every subject he considered. For example, he questioned whether man is superior to animals or civilized Europeans to "savages" in the Americas and whether human reason is a truly reliable faculty. Although he was extraordinarily well read and continuously quoted from ancient poetry, history, and philosophy, Montaigne insisted on trusting only his own judgment and taking no idea or tradition on authority.

*The essay excerpted below, *On the Education of Children* (1575), exemplifies this approach very well. Education, he argued, is similar to philosophy. It should not consist in teaching the Latin language and inculcating knowledge of Latin classics, but rather in careful reflection, the development of judgment, hands-on activities, personal freedom, learning from everyday situations, and playfulness.*

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On the Education of Children

. . . But, in truth, all I understand, as to this particular, is only this, that the greatest and most important difficulty of human science is the nurture and education of children. For, as in agriculture, all that precedes planting, as also planting itself, is certain, plain, and easy; but, after that which is planted takes life and shoots up, there is a great deal more to be done, and much more difficulty to be got over to cultivate and bring it to perfection; so it is with men; it is no hard matter to plant them, but after they are born then begins the trouble, solicitude, and care, to train and bring them up. The symptoms of their inclinations at that tender age are so slight and obscure, and the promises so uncertain and fallacious, that it is very hard to establish any solid judgment or conjecture upon them. Look at Cimon,² for example, and Themistocles,³ and a thousand others, whose manhood has given the lie to the ill-promise of their early youth. Bears' cubs and puppies discover their natural inclination; but men, so soon as they are grown up, immediately applying themselves to certain habits, engaging themselves in certain opinions, and conforming themselves to

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Works of Michael de Montaigne*, ed. William Hazlitt (London: John Templeman, 1842), 60–61, 62, 64, 66–67, 68, 69–70, 76.

² Cimon (510–450 B.C.) was an Athenian statesman and military general in Greece.

³ Themistocles or Themistokles (527–459 B.C.) was an Athenian politician and general who rose to prominence in the early years of the Athenian democracy.

particular laws and customs, do easily change, or, at least, disguise, their true and real disposition. And yet it is hard to force the propensity of nature; whence it comes to pass that, for not having chosen the right course, a man throws away very great pains, and consumes great part of his time in training up children to things for which, by their natural aversion, they are totally unfit. In this difficulty, nevertheless, I am clearly of opinion that they ought to be elemented⁴ in the best and most advantageous studies, without taking too much notice of, or being too superstitious in, those light prognostics we too often conceive of them in their tender years; to which Plato,⁵ in his Republic, gives, methinks, too much authority.

But, madam,⁶ learning is doubtless a very great ornament, and a thing of marvellous use, especially to persons raised to that degree of fortune in which you are placed; and, in truth, in persons of mean and low condition, it cannot perform its true and genuine office, being naturally more prompt to assist in the conduct of war, in the government of a people, and in negotiating leagues with princes and foreign nations, than in forming a syllogism in logic, in pleading a process in law, or in prescribing a dose of pills in physic. Wherefore, madam, believing you will not omit this so necessary embellishment in the training of your posterity, yourself having tasted the delights of it, and being of a learned extraction (for we yet have the writings of the ancient Counts of Foix, from whom my lord, your husband, and yourself are both descended, and Monsieur Francis de Candale, your uncle, does, every day, oblige the world with others, which will extend the knowledge of this quality in your family to many succeeding ages), I will, upon this occasion, presume to acquaint you with one particular fancy of my own, contrary to the common method, which is all I am able to contribute to your service in this matter.

The charge of the tutor you shall provide for your son, upon the choice of whom depends the whole success of his education, has several other great branches which, however, I shall not touch upon, as being unable to add anything of moment to the common rules; and also in this, wherein I take upon me to advise, he may follow it so far as it shall appear rational and conducing to the end in view. For a boy of quality then, who pretends to letters, not upon the account of profit (for so mean an object as that is unworthy of the grace and favour of the muses; and, moreover, has reference to others), nor so much for outward ornament, as for his own proper and peculiar use, and to furnish and enrich himself within, having rather a desire to come out an accomplished gentleman than a mere learned man; for such a one, I say, I would have his friends solicitous to find him out a tutor who has rather an elegant than a learned head, though both, if such a person can be found; but, however, to prefer manners and judgment before reading, and that this man should pursue the exercise of his charge after a new model.

...

Let the tutor make his pupil examine and thoroughly sift everything he reads, and lodge nothing in his head upon simple authority and upon trust. Let Aristotle's⁷ Principles be no more principles to him than those of Epicurus⁸ and the Stoics;⁹ let the diversity of

⁴ Provided with one's earliest education or training.

⁵ Plato (c. 428–c. 423 B.C.) was an influential figure in Western philosophy, and tutor to Aristotle.

⁶ Montaigne was writing this essay to Madame Diane de Foix, Comtesse de Gurson, who was expecting a baby.

⁷ Aristotle (38–322 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher and scientist and tutor of Alexander the Great.

⁸ Epicurus (341–270 B.C.), a Hellenistic Greek philosopher, founded the school of Epicureanism.

⁹ Stoicism was a Hellenistic philosophical movement founded in Athens by Zeno (344–262 B.C.)

opinions be propounded to, and laid before, him, he will himself choose, if he be able; if not, he will remain in doubt.

“I love sometimes to doubt as well as know.”¹⁰

For if he embrace the opinions of Xenophon¹¹ and Plato, by the exercise of his reason they will no more be theirs, but become his own. Who follows another, follows nothing, finds nothing, nay, seeks nothing. *Non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicet.*¹² “We are not under a king; let every one dispose of himself.” Let him, at least, know that he does know. ‘Tis for him to imbibe their knowledge, but not to adopt their dogmas; and no matter if he forgets where he had his learning, provided he knows how to apply it to his own use; truth and reason are common to every one, and are no more his who spoke them first than his who spake them after. ‘Tis no more according to Plato than according to me, since both he and I equally see and understand in the same manner. Bees cull their several sweets from this flower and that blossom, here and there where they find them, but themselves after make the honey which is all and purely their own, and no longer thyme and marjoram;¹³ so the several fragments the pupil borrows from others he will transform and blend together to compile a work that shall be absolutely his own; that is to say, his judgment, which his instruction, labour, and study should alone tend to form. He is not obliged to discover whence he had his materials, but only to produce what he has done with them. . . .

...

Let conscience and virtue be eminently manifest in his speech, and have only reason for their guide. Make him understand that to acknowledge the error he shall discover in his own argument, though only found out by himself, it is an effect of judgment and sincerity, which are the principal things he is to seek after. That obstinacy and contention are common qualities, most appearing in and best becoming a mean soul. That to recollect and correct himself, and to forsake a bad argument in the height and heat of dispute, are great and rare philosophical qualities. Let him be directed, being in company, to have his eye and ear in every corner of the room; for I find that the places of greatest honour are commonly possessed by men that have least in them, and that the greatest fortunes are not always accompanied with the ablest parts. I have been present, when, whilst they at the upper end of the table have been only commending the beauty of the Arras,¹⁴ or the flavour of the wine, many fine things have been lost or thrown away at the lower end of the table. Let him examine every man’s talent; a peasant, a bricklayer, or any casual passenger, a man may learn something from every one of these in their several capacities, and something will be picked out of their discourse, whereof some use may be made at one time or another; nay, even the folly and weakness of others will contribute to his instruction. By observing the graces and manners of all he sees, he will create to himself an emulation of the good, and a contempt of the bad.

...

¹⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, i, 93.

¹¹ Xenophon of Athens (c. 430–354 B.C.) was a Greek historian, soldier, mercenary, and student of Socrates.

¹² Seneca, *Epis.*, 33.

¹³ Two flowering herbs.

¹⁴ A type of tapestry from Flanders used for wall decoration.

This great world, which some do yet multiply as several species under one genus, is the mirror wherein we are to behold ourselves, to be able to know ourselves as we ought to do. In short, I would have this to be the book my young gentleman should study with the most attention; for so many humours, so many sects, so many judgments, opinions, laws, and customs, teach us to judge aright of our own, and inform our understanding to discover its imperfection and natural infirmity, which is no trivial lesson. So many mutations of states and kingdoms, and so many turns and revolutions of public fortune, will make us wise enough to make no great wonder of our own. So many great names, so many famous victories and conquests drowned and swallowed in oblivion, render our hopes ridiculous of eternizing our names by the taking of half a score light horse, or a paltry turret, which only derives its memory from its ruin. The pride and arrogance of so many foreign pomps and ceremonies, the inflated majesty of so many courts and grandeurs, accustom and fortify our sight, without winking, to behold and endure the lustre of our own. So many millions of men buried before us, encourage us not to fear to go seek such good company in the other world, and so of all the rest. Pythagoras¹⁵ was wont to say, that our life resembled the great and populous assembly of the Olympic Games: some exercise the body for glory, others carry merchandise to sell for profit; there are also some, and those none of the worst sort, who pursue no other advantage than only to look on, and to consider how and why every thing is done, and to be inactive spectators of the lives of other men, thereby the better to judge of and regulate their own.

...

After having taught our pupil what will make him more wise and good, you may then show him the elements of logic, physic, geometry, and rhetoric; and the science which he shall then himself most incline to, his judgment being, beforehand, formed and fit to choose, he will quickly make his own. The way of instructing him ought to be, sometimes by discourse, and sometimes by reading; sometimes his governor shall put the author himself, which he shall think most proper for him, into his hands, and sometimes only the marrow and substance of it; and if the governor himself be not conversant enough in books to turn to all the fine discourses the book contains, there may some man of letters be joined to him, that, upon every occasion shall supply him with what he desires and stands in need of, to recommend to his pupil. And who can doubt but that this way of teaching is much more easy and natural than that of Gaza?¹⁶ In which the precepts are so intricate, and so harsh, and the words so vain, empty, and insignificant, that there is no hold on them; nothing that quickens and elevates the wit and fancy; whereas, here the mind has what to feed upon and to digest. This fruit, therefore, is not only, without comparison, much finer, but will also be much more early ripe.

...

Such a tutor will make a pupil to digest this new lesson, that the height and value of true virtue consists in the facility, utility, and pleasure of its exercise; so far from difficulty that boys as well as men, and the innocent as well as the subtle, may make it their own; and 'tis by order and good conduct, not by force, that it is to be acquired. Socrates,¹⁷ her first

¹⁵ Pythagoras of Samos (570–495 B.C.) was an Ionian Greek philosopher and mathematician, and is famous as the founder of the religious movement Pythagoreanism.

¹⁶ A man of letters of the fifteenth century from Thessalonica who wrote a complicated Greek grammar book.

¹⁷ Socrates (c. 470–399 B.C.), an Athenian philosopher credited as a founder of Western philosophy.

favourite, is so averse to all manner of violence as totally to throw it aside, to slip into the more natural facility of her own progress. . . .

...
 As to the rest, this method of education ought to be carried on with a firm gentleness, quite contrary to the practice of our pedants, who instead of tempting and alluring children to letters, present nothing before them but rods and ferrules, horror and cruelty. Away with this violence! away with this compulsion! than which, I certainly believe nothing more dulls and degenerates a well-born nature. If you would have him fear shame and chastisement, do not harden him to them. Inure him to heat and cold, to wind and sun, and to dangers that he ought to despise. Wake him from all effeminacy in clothes and lodging, eating and drinking; accustom him to every thing, that he may not be a Sir Paris, a carpet-knight, but a sinewy, hardy, and vigorous young man. I have ever, from a child to the age wherein I now am, been of this opinion, and am still constant to it. But, amongst other things, the strict government of most of our colleges¹⁸ has always displeased me, and peradventure they might have erred less perniciously on the indulgent side. They are mere jails, where imprisoned youths are taught to be debauched, by being punished for it before they are so. Do but come in when they are about their lesson, and you shall hear nothing but the outcries of boys under execution, and the thundering of pedagogues, drunk with fury. A very pretty way this to tempt these tender and timorous souls to love their book! leading them on with a furious countenance, and a rod in hand! a wretched and pernicious way! besides what Quintilian¹⁹ has very well observed, that this insolent authority is often attended by very dangerous consequences, and particularly our way of chastising. How much more decent would it be to see their classes strewed with leaves and flowers, than with bloody stumps of birch! Were it left to my ordering, I should paint the school with pictures of joy and gladness, Flora and the Graces,²⁰ as the philosopher Speusippus²¹ did his; that where their profit is they might there have their pleasure too. Such viands²² as are proper and wholesome for children should be seasoned with sugar, and such as are dangerous to them with gall. It is admirable to see how solicitous Plato is in his laws for the gayety and diversion of the youth of his city, and how he enlarges upon their races, sports, songs, leaps, and dances; of which he says that antiquity has given the ordering and patronage to the gods themselves, to Apollo,²³ Minerva,²⁴ and the Muses.²⁵ He insists upon a thousand precepts for exercise; but as to the lettered sciences says very little, and only seems particularly to recommend poetry upon the account of music.

¹⁸ High schools.

¹⁹ Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35–c. 100) was a Roman expert on rhetoric (persuasive writing) and author of a major textbook on that subject.

²⁰ Roman goddesses often depicted in art during the Italian Renaissance.

²¹ Speusippus (c. 408–339/8 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher and Plato's nephew. He ran the Academy after Plato's death.

²² Foods.

²³ The Greek god of music, poetry, art, oracles, archery, plague, medicine, sun, light, and knowledge

²⁴ The Roman goddess of wisdom and sponsor of arts, trade, and strategy.

²⁵ In Greek mythology, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. There are nine Muses, each believed to inspire creativity: Clio (history), Urania (astronomy), Melpomene (tragedy), Thalia (comedy), Terpsichore (dance), Calliope (epic poetry), Erato (love poetry), Polyhymnia (songs to the gods), and Euterpe (lyric poetry).

To return to my subject; there is nothing like alluring the appetite and affection, otherwise you make nothing but so many asses laden with books, and by virtue of the lash give them their pocket full of learning to keep; whereas, to do well, you should not only lodge it with them, but make them espouse it.