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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat

FREEDOM VERSUS AUTHORITY IN EDUCATION

Bertrand Russell

Freedom, in education as in other things, must be a matter of degree. Some freedoms cannot be tolerated. I met a lady once who maintained that no child should ever be forbidden to do anything, because a child ought to develop its nature from within. 'How if its nature leads it to swallow pins?' I asked; but I regret to say the answer was mere vituperation. And yet every child, left to itself, will sooner or later swallow pins, or drink poison out of medicine bottles, or fall out of an upper window, or otherwise bring itself to a bad end. At a slightly later age, boys, when they have the opportunity, will go unwashed, overeat, smoke till they are sick, catch chills from sitting in wet feet, and so on—let alone the fact that they will amuse themselves by plaguing elderly gentlemen, who may not all have Elisha's powers of repartee. Therefore one who advocates freedom in education cannot mean that children should do exactly as they please all day long. An element of discipline and authority must exist; the question is as to the amount of it, and the way in which it is to be exercised.

Education may be viewed from many standpoints: that of the State, of the Church, of the schoolmaster, of the parents, or even (though this is usually forgotten) of the child itself. Each of these points of view is partial; each contributes something to the ideal of education, but also contributes elements that are bad. Let us examine them successively, and see what is to be said for and against them.

We will begin with the State, as the most powerful force in deciding what modern education is to be. The interest of the State in education is very recent. It did not exist in antiquity or the middle Ages; until the Renaissance, education was only valued by the Church. The Renaissance brought an interest in advanced scholarship, leading to the foundation of such institutions as the Collège de France, intended to offset the ecclesiastical Sorbonne. The Reformation, in England and Germany, brought a desire on the part of the State to have some control over universities and grammar schools, to prevent them from remaining hotbeds of 'Popery'. But this interest soon evaporated. The State took no decisive or continuous part until the quite modern movement for universal compulsory education. Nevertheless the State, now, has more to say to scholastic institutions than have all the other factors combined.

The motives which led to universal compulsory education were various. Its strongest advocates were moved by the feeling that it is in itself desirable to be able to read and write, that an ignorant population is a disgrace to a civilised country, and that democracy is impossible without education. These motives were reinforced by others. It was soon seen that education gave commercial advantages, that it diminished juvenile crime, and that it gave opportunities for regimenting slum populations. Anti-clericals perceived in State education an opportunity of combating the influence of the Church; this motive weighed considerably in England and France. Nationalists, especially after the Franco-Prussian War, considered that universal education would increase the national strength. All these other reasons, however, were at first subsidiary. The main reason for adopting universal education was the feeling that illiteracy was disgraceful. This institution, once firmly established, was found by the state to be capable of many uses. It makes young people more docile, both for good and evil. It improves manners and diminishes crime; it facilitates common action for public ends; it makes the community more responsive to direction from a centre. Without it, democracy cannot exist except as an empty form. But democracy, as conceived by politicians, is a form of government, that is to say, it is a method of

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making people do what their leaders wish under the impression that they are doing what they themselves wish. Accordingly, State education has acquired a certain bias. It teaches the young (so far as it can) to respect existing institutions, to avoid all fundamental criticism of the powers that be, and to regard foreign nations with suspicion and contempt. It increases national solidarity at the expense both of internationalism and of individual development. The damage to individual development comes through the undue stress upon authority. Collective rather than individual emotions are encouraged, and disagreement with prevailing beliefs is severely repressed. Uniformity is desired because it is convenient to the administrator, regardless of the fact that it can only be secured by mental atrophy. So great are the resulting evils that it can be seriously questioned whether universal education has hitherto done good or harm on the balance.

The point of view of the Church as regards education is, in practice, not very different from that of the State. There is, however, one important divergence: the Church would prefer that the laity should not be educated at all, and only give them instruction when the State insists. The State and the Church both wish to instil beliefs which are likely to be dispelled by free inquiry. But the State creed is easier to instil into a population which can read the newspaper, whereas the Church creed is easier to instil into a wholly illiterate population. State and Church are both hostile to thought, but the Church is also (though now surreptitiously) hostile to instruction. This will pass, and is passing, as the ecclesiastical authorities perfect the technique of giving instruction without stimulating mental activity—a technique in which, long ago, the Jesuits led the way.

The schoolmaster, in the modern world, is seldom allowed a point of view of his own. He is appointed by an education authority, and is 'sacked' if he is found to be educating. Apart from this economic motive, the schoolmaster is exposed to temptations of which he is likely to be unconscious. He stands, even more directly than the State and the Church, for discipline; officially he knows what his pupils do not know. Without some element of discipline and authority, it is difficult to keep a class in order. It is easier to punish a boy for showing boredom than it is to be interesting. Moreover, even the best schoolmaster is likely to exaggerate his importance, and to deem it possible and desirable to mould his pupils into the sort of human beings that he thinks they ought to be. Lytton Strachey describes Dr Arnold walking beside the Lake of Como and meditating on 'moral evil'. Moral evil, for him, was whatever he wished to change in his boys. The belief that there was a great deal of it in them justified him in the exercise of power, and in conceiving of himself as a ruler whose duty was even more to chasten than to love. This attitude—variously phrased in various ages—is natural to any schoolmaster who is zealous without being on the watch for the deceitful influence of self-importance. Nevertheless the teacher is far the best of the forces concerned in education, and it is primarily to him or her that we must look for progress.

Then again, the schoolmaster wants the credit of his school. This makes him wish to have his boys distinguish themselves in athletic contests and scholarship examinations, which leads to care for a certain selection of superior boys to the exclusion of others. For the rank and file, the result is bad. It is much better for a boy to play a game badly himself than to watch others playing it well. Mr H.G. Wells, in his *Life of Sanderson of Oundle*, tells how this really great schoolmaster set his face against everything that left the faculties of the average boy unexercised and uncared-for. When he became headmaster, he found that only certain selected

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boys were expected to sing in chapel; they were trained as a choir, and the rest listened. Sanderson insisted that all should sing, whether musical or not. In this he was rising above the bias which is natural to a schoolmaster who cares more for his credit than for his boys. Of course, if we all apportioned credit wisely there would be no conflict between these two motives: the school which did best by the boys would get the most credit. But in a busy world spectacular successes will always win credit out of proportion to their real importance, so that some conflict between the two motives is hardly avoidable.

I come now to the point of view of the parent. This differs according to the economic status of the parent: the average wage-earner has desires quite different from those of the average professional man. The average wage-earner wishes to get his children to school as soon as possible, so as to diminish bother at home; he also wishes to get them away as soon as possible, so as to profit by their earnings. When recently the British Government decided to cut down expenditure on education, it proposed that children should not go to school before the age of six, and should not be obliged to stay after the age of thirteen. The former proposal caused such a popular outcry that it had to be dropped: the indignation of worried mothers (recently enfranchised) was irresistible. The latter proposal, lowering the age for leaving school, was not unpopular. Parliamentary candidates advocating better education would get unanimous applause from those who came to meetings, but would find, in canvassing, that unpolitical wage-earners (who are the majority) want their children to be free to get paid work as soon as possible. The exceptions are mainly those who hope that their children may rise in the social scale through better education.

Professional men have quite a different outlook. Their own income depends upon the fact that they have had a better education than the average, and they wish to hand on this advantage to their children. For this object they are willing to make great sacrifices. But in our present competitive society, what will be desired by the average parent is not an education which is good in itself, but an education which is better than other people's. This may be facilitated by keeping down the general level, and therefore we cannot expect a professional man to be enthusiastic about facilities for higher education for the children of wage-earner. If everybody who desired it could get a medical education, however poor his parents might be, it is obvious that doctors would earn less than they do, both from increased competition and from the improved health of the community. The same thing applies to the law, the civil service, and so on. Thus the good things which the professional man desires for his own children he will not desire for the bulk of the population unless he has exceptional public spirit.

The fundamental defect of fathers, in our competitive society, is that they want their children to be a credit to them. This is rooted in instinct, and can only be cured by efforts directed to that end. The defect exists also, though to a lesser degree, in mothers. We all feel instinctively, that our children's successes reflect glory upon ourselves, while their failures make us feel shame. Unfortunately, the successes which cause us to swell with pride are often of an undesirable kind. From the dawn of civilisation till almost our own time—and still in China and Japan—parents have sacrificed their children's happiness in marriage by deciding whom they were to marry, choosing almost always the richest bride or bridegroom available. In the Western world (except partially in France) children have freed themselves from this slavery by rebellion, but parents' instincts have not changed. Neither happiness nor virtue, but worldly success, is what the average father desires for his children. He wants them to be such as he can boast of to his



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cronies, and this desire largely dominates his efforts for their education.

Authority, if it is to govern education, must rest upon one or several of the powers we have considered: the State, the Church, the schoolmaster and the parent. We have seen that no one of them can be trusted to care adequately for the child's welfare, since each wishes the child to minister to some end which has nothing to do with its own well-being. The State wants the child to serve for national aggrandisement and the support of the existing form of government. The Church wants the child to serve for increasing the power of the priesthood. The schoolmaster, in a competitive world, too often regards his school as the State regards the nation, and wants the child to glorify the school. The parent wants the child to glorify the family. The child itself, as an end in itself, as a separate human being with a claim to whatever happiness and well-being may be possible, does not come into these various external purposes, except very partially. Unfortunately, the child lacks the experience required for the guidance of its own life, and is therefore a prey to the sinister interests that batten on its innocence. This is what makes the difficulty of education as a political problem. But let us first see what can be said from the child's own point of view.

It is obvious that most children, if they were left to themselves, would not learn to read or write, and would grow up less adapted than they might be to the circumstances of their lives. There must be educational institutions, and children must be to some extent under authority. But in view of the fact that no authority can be wholly trusted, we must aim at having as little authority as possible, and try to think out ways by which young people's natural desires and impulses can be utilised in education. This is far more possible than is often thought, for, after all, the desire to acquire knowledge is natural to most young people.

The traditional pedagogue, possessing knowledge not worth imparting, and devoid of all skill in imparting it, imagined that young people have a native horror of instruction, but in this he was misled by failure to realise his own shortcomings. There is a charming tale of Tchekov's about a man who tried to teach a kitten to catch mice. When it wouldn't run after them, he beat it, with the result that even as an adult cat; it cowered with terror in the presence of a mouse. 'This is the man,' Tchekov adds, 'who taught me Latin.' Now cats teach their kittens to catch mice, but they wait till the instinct has awakened. Then the kittens agree with their mammas that the knowledge is worth acquiring, so that discipline is not required.

The first two or three years of life have hitherto escaped the domination of the pedagogue, and all authorities are agreed that those are the years in which we learn most. Every child learns to talk by its own efforts. Anyone who has watched an infant knows that the efforts required are very considerable. The child listens intently, watches movements of the lips, practises sounds all day long, and concentrates with amazing ardour. Of course grownup people encourage it by praise, but it does not occur to them to punish it on days when it learns no new word. All that they provide is opportunity and praise. It is doubtful whether more is required at any stage.

What is necessary is to make the child or young person feel that the knowledge is worth having. Sometimes this is difficult because in fact the knowledge is not worth having. It is also difficult when only a considerable amount of knowledge in any direction is useful, so that at first the pupil tends to be merely bored. In such cases, however, the difficulty is not insuperable. Take, for instance, the teaching of mathematics. Sanderson of Oundle found that almost all his boys were interested in machinery, and he provided them with opportunities for making quite elaborate machines. In the course of this practical work, they came upon the necessity for

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making calculations, and thus grew interested in mathematics as required for the success of a constructive enterprise on which they were keen. This method is expensive, and involves patient skill on the part of the teacher. But it goes along the lines of the pupil's instinct, and is therefore likely to involve less boredom with more intellectual effort. Effort is natural both to animals and men, but it must be effort for which there is an instinctive stimulus. A football match involves more effort than the treadmill, yet the one is a pleasure and the other a punishment. It is a mistake to suppose that mental effort can rarely be a pleasure; what is true is that certain conditions are required to make it pleasurable, and that, until lately, no attempt was made to create these conditions in education. The chief conditions are: first, a problem of which the solution is desired; secondly, a feeling of hopefulness as to the possibility of obtaining a solution. Consider the way David Copperfield was taught Arithmetic:

Even when the lessons are done, the worst is yet to happen, in the shape of an appalling sum. This is invented for me, and delivered to me orally by Mr Murdstone, and begins, "If I go into a cheesemonger's shop, and buy five thousand double Gloucester cheeses at four pence-halfpenny each, present payment"—at which I see Miss Murdstone secretly overjoyed. I pore over these cheeses without any result or enlightenment until dinner-time; when, having made a mulatto of myself by getting the dirt of the slate into the pores of my skin, I have a slice of bread to help me out with the cheeses, and am considered in disgrace for the rest of the evening.

Obviously the poor boy could not be expected to take any interest in the cheeses, or to have any hope of doing the sum right. If he had wanted a box of a certain size, and had been told to save up his allowance until he could buy enough wood and nails, it would have stimulated his arithmetical powers amazingly.

There should be nothing hypothetical about the sums that a child is asked to do. I remember once reading a young boy's own account of his arithmetic lesson. The governess set the problem: If a horse is worth three times as much as a pony, and the pony is worth £22, what is the horse worth? 'Had he been down?' asks the boy. 'That makes no difference,' says the governess. 'Oh, but James (the groom) says it makes a great difference.' The power of understanding hypothetical truth is one of the latest developments of logical faculty, and ought not to be expected in the very young. This, however, is a digression, from which we must return to our main theme.

I do not maintain that all children can have their intellectual interests aroused by suitable stimuli. Some have much less than average intelligence, and require special treatment. It is very undesirable to combine in one class children whose mental capacities are very different: the cleverer ones will be bored by having things explained that they clearly understand, and the stupider ones will be worried by having things taken for granted that they have not yet grasped. But subjects and methods should be adapted to the intelligence of the pupil. Macaulay was made to learn mathematics at Cambridge, but it is obvious from his letters that it was a sheer waste of time. I was made to learn Latin and Greek, but I resented it, being of opinion that it was silly to learn a language that was no longer spoken. I believe that all the little good I got from years of classical studies I could have got in adult life in a month. After the bare minimum, account should be taken of tastes, and pupils should only be taught what they find interesting. This puts a strain upon teachers, who find it easier to be dull, especially if they are over-worked. But the difficulties can be overcome by giving teachers shorter hours and instruction in the art

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of teaching, which is done at present in training teachers in elementary schools, but not teachers in universities or public schools.

Freedom in education has many aspects. There is first of all freedom to learn or not to learn. Then there is freedom as to what to learn. And in later education there is freedom of opinion. Freedom to learn or not to learn can be only partially conceded in childhood. It is necessary to make sure that all who are not imbecile learn to read and write. How far this can be done by the mere provision of opportunity, only experience can show. But even if opportunity alone suffices, children must have the opportunity thrust upon them. Most of them would rather play out of doors, where the necessary opportunities would be lacking. Later on, it might be left to the choice of young people whether, for instance, they should go to the university; some would wish to do so, others would not. This would make quite as good a principle of selection as any to be got from entrance examinations. Nobody who did not work should be allowed to stay at a university. The rich young men who now waste their time in college are demoralising others and teaching themselves to be useless. If hard work were exacted as a condition of residence, universities would cease to be attractive to people with distaste for intellectual pursuits.

Freedom as to what to learn ought to exist far more than at present. I think it is necessary to group subjects by their natural affinities; there are grave disadvantages in the elective system, which leaves a young man free to choose wholly unconnected subjects. If I were organising education in Utopia, with unlimited funds, I should give every child, at the age of about twelve, some instruction in classics, mathematics, and science. After two years, it ought to be evident where the child's aptitudes lay, and the child's own tastes would be a safe indication, provided there were no 'soft options'. Consequently I should allow every boy and girl who so desired to specialise from the age of fourteen. At first, the specialisation would be very broad, growing gradually more defined as education advanced. The time when it was possible to be universally well-informed is past. An industrious man may know something of history and literature, which requires knowledge of classical and modern languages. Or he may know some parts of mathematics, or one or two sciences. But the ideal of an 'all-round' education is out of date; it has been destroyed by the progress of knowledge.

Freedom of opinion, on the part of both teachers and pupils the most important of the various kinds of freedom, and the only one which requires no limitations whatever. In view of the fact that it does not exist, it is worth while to recapitulate the arguments in its favour.

The fundamental argument for freedom of opinion is the doubtfulness of all our beliefs. If we certainly knew the truth, there would be something to be said for teaching it. But in that case it could be taught without invoking authority, by means of its inherent reasonableness. It is not necessary to make a law that no one shall be allowed to teach arithmetic if he holds heretical opinions on the multiplication table, because here the truth is clear, and does not require to be enforced by penalties. When the State intervenes to ensure the teaching of some doctrine, it does so because there is no conclusive evidence in favour of that doctrine. The result is that the teaching is not truthful, even if it should happen to be true. In the State of New York, it was till lately illegal to teach that Communism is good; in Soviet Russia, it is illegal to teach that Communism is bad. No doubt one of these opinions is true and one false, but no one knows which. Either New York or Soviet Russia was teaching truth and proscribing falsehood, but neither was teaching truthfully, because each was representing a doubtful proposition as certain. The difference between truth and truthfulness is important in this connection. Truth is for the



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gods; from our point of view, it is an ideal, towards which we can approximate, but which we cannot hope to reach. Education should fit us for the nearest possible approach to truth, and to do this it must teach truthfulness. Truthfulness, as I mean it, is the habit of forming our opinions on the evidence, and holding them with that degree of conviction which the evidence warrants. This degree will always fall short of complete certainty, and therefore we must be always ready to admit new evidence against previous beliefs. Moreover, when we act on a belief, we must, if possible, only take such action as will be useful even if our belief is more or less inaccurate; we should avoid actions which are disastrous unless our belief is exactly true. In science, an observer states his results along with the 'probable error'; but who ever heard of a theologian or a politician stating the probable error in his dogmas, or even admitting that any error is conceivable? That is because in science, where we approach nearest to real knowledge, a man can safely rely on the strength of his case, whereas, where nothing is known, blatant assertion and hypnotism are the usual ways of causing others to share our beliefs. If the fundamentalists thought they had a good case against evolution, they would not make the teaching of it illegal.

The habit of teaching some one orthodoxy, political, religious, or moral, has all kinds of bad effects. To begin with, it excludes from the teaching profession men who combine honesty with intellectual vigour, who are just the men likely to have the best moral and mental effect upon their pupils. I will give three illustrations. First, as to politics: a teacher of economics in America is expected to teach such doctrines as will and to the wealth and power of the very rich; if he does not, he finds it advisable to go elsewhere, like Mr Laski, formerly of Harvard, now one of the most valuable teachers in the London School of Economics. Second, as to religion: the immense majority of intellectually eminent men disbelieve the Christian religion, but they conceal the fact in public, because they are afraid of losing their incomes. Thus on the most important of all subjects most of the men whose opinions and arguments would be best worth having are condemned to silence. Third, as to morals: Practically all men are unchaste at some time of their lives; clearly those who conceal this fact are worse than those who do not, since they add the guilt of hypocrisy. But it is only to the hypocrites that teaching posts are open. So much for the effects of orthodoxy upon the choice and character of teachers.

I come now to the effect upon the pupils, which I will take under two heads, intellectual and moral. Intellectually, what is stimulating to a young man is a problem of obvious practical importance, as to which he finds that divergent opinions are held. A young man learning economics, for example, ought to hear lectures from individualists and socialists, protectionists and free-traders, inflationists and believers in the gold standard. He ought to be encouraged to read the best books of the various schools, as recommended by those who believe in them. This would teach him to weigh arguments and evidence, to know that no opinion is certainly right, and to judge men by their quality rather than by their consonance with preconceptions. History should be taught not only from the point of view of one's own country, but also from that of foreigners. If history were taught by Frenchmen in England, and by Englishmen in France, there would be no disagreements between the two countries, each would understand the other's point of view. A young man should learn to think that all questions are open, and that an argument should be followed wherever it leads. The needs of practical life will destroy this attitude all too soon when he begins to earn his living; but until that time he should be encouraged to taste the joys of free speculation.

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Morally, also, the teaching of an orthodoxy to the young is very harmful. There is not only the fact that it compels the abler teachers to be hypocrites, and therefore to set a bad moral example. There is also, what is more important, the fact that it encourages intolerance and the bad forms of herd instinct. Edmund Gosse, in his *Father and Son*, relates how, when he was a boy, his father told him he was going to marry again. The boy saw there was something his father was ashamed of, so at last he asked, in accents of horror: 'Father, is she a Paedo-Baptist?' And she was. Until that moment, he had believed all Paedo-Baptists to be wicked. So children in Catholic schools believe that Protestants are wicked, children in any school in an English-speaking country believe that atheists are wicked, children in France believe that Germans are wicked, and children in Germany believe that Frenchmen are wicked. When a school accepts as part of its task the teaching of an opinion which cannot be intellectually defended (as practically all schools do), it is compelled to give the impression that those who hold an opposite opinion are wicked, since otherwise it cannot generate the passion required for repelling the assaults of reason. Thus for the sake of orthodoxy the children are rendered uncharitable, intolerant, cruel, and bellicose. This is unavoidable so long as definite opinions are prescribed on politics, morals, and religion.

Finally, arising out of this moral damage to the individual, there is untold damage to society. Wars and persecutions are rife everywhere, and everywhere they are rendered possible by the teaching in the schools. Wellington used to say that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton. He might have said with more truth that the war against revolutionary France was instigated in the classrooms of Eton. In our democratic age, Eton has become unimportant; now, it is the ordinary elementary and secondary school that matters. In every country, by means of flag-waving, Empire Day, Fourth-of-July celebrations, Officer's Training Corps, etc., everything is done to give boys a taste for homicide, and girls a conviction that men given to homicide are the most worthy of respect. This whole system of moral degradation to which innocent boys and girls are exposed would become impossible if the authorities allowed freedom of opinion to teachers and pupils.

Regimentation is the source of the evil. Education authorities do not look on children, as religion is supposed to do, as human beings with souls to be saved. They look upon them as material for grandiose social schemes: future 'hands' in factories or 'bayonets' in war or what not. No man is fit to educate unless he feels each pupil an end in himself, with his own rights and his own personality, not merely a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, or a soldier in a regiment, or a citizen in a State. Reverence for human personality is the beginning of wisdom, in every social question, but above all in education.