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**Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat**  
**THE NEGATIVE THEORY OF EDUCATION**

**Bertrand Russell**

Three divergent theories of education all have their advocates in the present day. Of these the first considers that the sole purpose of education is to provide opportunities of growth and to remove hampering influences. The second holds that the purpose of education is to give culture to the individual and to develop his capacities to the utmost. The third holds that education is to be considered rather in relation to the community than in relation to the individual, and that its business is to train useful citizens. Of these theories the first is the newest while the third is the oldest. The second and third theories, which we considered in the preceding chapter, have in common the view that education can give something positive, while the first regards its function as purely negative. No actual education proceeds wholly and completely on any one of the three theories. All three in varying proportions are found in every system that actually exists. It is, I think, fairly clear that no one of the three is adequate by itself, and that the choice of a right system of education depends in great measure upon the adoption of a due proportion between the three theories. For my part, while I think that there is more truth in the first theory, which we may call the negative view of education, I do not think that it contains by any means the whole truth. The negative view has dominated much progressive thinking on education. It is part of the general creed of liberty which has inspired liberal thought since the time of Rousseau. Oddly enough, political liberalism has been connected with the belief in compulsory education, while the belief in freedom in education exists in great measure among Socialists, and even Communists. Nevertheless, this belief is ideologically connected with liberalism, and has the same degree of truth and falsehood that belongs to the conception of liberty in other spheres.

Until very recent times hardly anybody questioned the view that it is the business of education to train the child in the way he should go. He was to be taught moral maxims, habits of industry, and a stock of knowledge proportional to his social station. The methods by which this was to be achieved were rough and ready, in fact not unlike those employed in the training of horses. What the whip was to do to the horse the rod was to do to the child. It cannot be denied that this system, for all its crudity, produced on the whole the results at which it aimed. It was only a minority that suffered education, but in that minority certain habits had been formed – habits of self-discipline and social conformity, of capacity for command, and of harshness that took no account of human needs. Men trained under Dr Keate and similar pedagogues made our England what it is, and extended the blessings of our civilisation to the benighted heathen in India and Africa. I do not wish to belittle this achievement, and I am not sure that it would have been possible by any other method with the same economy of effort. Its products, owing to a certain Spartan toughness and to a complete incapacity for intellectual doubt, acquired the qualities needed by an imperial race among the backward peoples. They were able to pass on the stern rule to which they had been subjected in youth, and to avoid the realisation that what they supposed to be their education had starved the intelligence and the emotions in order to strengthen the will. In America a similar result was achieved by Puritanism while it remained vigorous.

The Romantic Movement was essentially a protest in the name of the emotions against the previous undue emphasis upon the will. The Romantic Movement achieved something as regards the treatment of very young children, but in the main the educational authorities were too firmly entrenched and too much habituated to command to be appreciably affected by the

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softer ideals of the Romantics. It is only in our own day that their general outlook upon life has begun to produce any really widespread effect upon educational theory, but just as *laissez faire* in economics has had to give way to new forms of ordered planning, so in education *laissez faire*, while it is a necessary stage, is not, I think, the last word. I propose in this chapter to state the case in its favour, and then to examine its limitations.

The case for the greatest possible freedom in education is a very strong one. To begin with, absence of freedom involves conflicts with adults, which frequently have a much more profound psychological effect than was realised until very recently. The child who is in any way coerced tends to respond with hatred, and if, as is usual, he is not able to give free vent to his hatred, it festers inwardly, and may sink into the unconscious with all kinds of strange consequences throughout the rest of life. The father as the object of hatred may come to be replaced by the State, the Church, or a foreign nation, thus leading a man to become an anarchist, an atheist, or a militarist as the case may be. Or again, hatred of the authorities who oppress the child may become transferred into a desire to inflict equal oppression later on upon the next generation. Or there may be merely a general moroseness, making pleasant social and personal relations impossible. I found one day in school a boy of medium size ill-treating a smaller boy. I expostulated, but he replied: 'The bigs hit me, so I hit the babies; that's fair.' In these words he epitomised the history of the human race.

Another effect of compulsion in education is that it destroys originality and intellectual interest. Desire for knowledge, at any rate for a good deal of knowledge, is natural to the young, but is generally destroyed by the fact that they are given more than they desire or can assimilate. Children who are forced to eat acquire a loathing for food, and children who are forced to learn acquire a loathing for knowledge. When they think, they do not think spontaneously in the way in which they run or jump or shout: they think with a view to pleasing some adult, and therefore with an attempt at correctness rather than from natural curiosity. The killing of spontaneity is especially disastrous in artistic directions. Children who are taught literature or painting or music to excess, or with a view to correctness rather than to self-expression, become progressively less interested in the aesthetic side of life. Even a boy's interest in mechanical devices can be killed by too much instruction. If you teach a boy the principle of the common pump in lesson-time, he will try to avoid acquiring the knowledge you are trying to impart, whereas if you have a pump in your back yard and forbid him to touch it he will spend all his leisure studying it. A great many of these troubles are avoided by making lessons voluntary. There is no longer friction between teacher and pupil, and in a fairly large proportion of cases the pupils consider the knowledge imparted by the teacher worth having. Their initiative is not destroyed, because it is by their own choice that they learn, and they do not accumulate masses of undigested hate to lie festering in the unconscious throughout the rest of life. The arguments for free speech, for freedom from politeness, and for freedom in regard to sex knowledge are even stronger, but I shall consider these matters separately at a later stage.

For all these reasons, reforming educators tend, and I think trend rightly, towards greater and greater freedom in the school. I do not think, however, that freedom in school can be erected into an absolute principle. It has its limitations, and it is important to realise what they are.

As one of the most obvious examples we may take cleanliness. I should like to say to begin with that most children of well-to-do parents are kept a great deal too clean. Parents excuse their behaviour on the ground that cleanliness is hygienic, but the motive for making it excessive

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is one of snobbery. If you see two children, one of whom is clean and the other is dirty, you tend to suppose that the clean one's parents have a larger income than the parents of the dirty one. Consequently snobs try to keep their children very clean. This is an abominable tyranny which interferes with the children doing a great many of the things they had better be doing. From the point of view of health it is well that the children should be clean twice a day, when they get up in the morning and when they go to bed at night. Between these two painful moments they should be grubbing about exploring the world, especially its grimier portions, ruining their clothes and wiping muddy hands on their faces. To deprive children of these pleasures is to lessen their initiative, their impulse towards exploration, and their acquisition of useful muscular habits. But although dirt is such an admirable thing, cleanliness also has its place in the morning and evening, as we said before, and even this limited place it will not secure in a child's life except through a good deal of coercion. If we wore no clothes and lived in a hot climate, we should get all the cleanliness that would be necessary through splashing in the water to keep cool. No doubt pithecanthropus erectus managed in this way, but we who wear clothes and live in temperate climates have not as much instinct towards cleanliness as health requires, and we therefore have to be taught to wash. The same thing applies to brushing teeth. If we ate our food raw like our remote ancestors, we should not need to brush our teeth, but so long as we retain the unnatural habit of cooking we have to balance it by another unnatural habit, namely the tooth-brush. The 'back-to-nature' cult, if it is to be compatible with health, must be thoroughgoing, and must involve the abandonment of clothes and cooking. If we are not prepared to go to these lengths we must teach our children certain habits which they will not acquire for themselves. In the matter of cleanliness and hygiene, therefore, although present conventional education involves much too great a limitation of freedom, yet some limitation is necessary in the interests of health.

Another rather humble virtue which is not likely to be produced by a wholly free education is punctuality. Punctuality is a quality the need of which is bound up with social co-operation. It has nothing to do with the relation of the soul to God, or with mystic insight, or with any of the matters with which the more elevated and spiritual moralists are concerned. One would be surprised to find a saint getting drunk, but one would not be surprised to find him late for an engagement. And yet in the ordinary business of life punctuality is absolutely necessary. It would not do for the engine-driver or the postman to wait till the spirit moved him to drive his engine or collect the letters. All economic organisations of any complexity would become unworkable if those concerned were often late. But habits of punctuality are hardly likely to be learned in a free atmosphere. They cannot exist in a man who allows his moods to dominate him. For this reason they are perhaps incompatible with the highest forms of achievement. Newton, as we know, was so unpunctual at his meals that his dog ate them without Newton's ever finding it out. The highest achievement in most directions demands capacity for absorption in a mood, but those whose work is less skilled, from royalty downward, do much harm if they are habitually unpunctual. It seems unavoidable, therefore, that young people should be subjected to the necessity of doing certain things at certain times if they are to be fitted to take any ordinary part in modern life. Those who show extraordinary talent, as poets or composers or pure mathematicians, may be exempted, but 99 per cent of mankind need a discipline in observing time which is quite impossible if they are allowed to grow freely as their natural impulses dictate. The noble savage, one presumes, went hunting when he was hungry, and not

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at 8.53 a.m. like his descendant in the suburbs. The education of the noble savage, therefore, does not supply all that the dweller in the suburbs requires.

A rather more serious matter, to which similar considerations apply, is honesty. I do not mean this term in any fancy sense; I mean merely respect for the property of others. This is not a natural characteristic of human beings. The undisciplined human being appropriates the property of others whenever he considers it safe to do so. Perhaps even the disciplined human being does this not infrequently, but discipline has taught him that theft is often not safe when at first sight it seems so. There is, I think, in the minds of some humane moderns a certain confusion of thought on this subject. Having discovered that there is such a thing as kleptomania, they are inclined to regard all thieving as kleptomania. But this is quite a mistake. Kleptomania consists of stealing things, which often the thief does not really want, in circumstances where he is pretty sure to be caught. It has as a rule some psychological source: the kleptomaniac, unconsciously to himself, is stealing love, or objects having some sexual significance. Kleptomania cannot be dealt with by punishment, but only by psychological understanding. Ordinary thieving, however, is by no means irrational, and just because it is rational it can be prevented by being made contrary to self interest through social penalties. In a community of children whom their elders leave free, the thief, unless he is the biggest of the group, will be severely punished by the others. The elders may wash their hands of the punishment and say that in their system there is no penal code, but in this they are guilty of self deception. The chances are that the penal code spontaneously created by a group of children will be more severe and more unreliable than one invented by adults. For the sake of the thief himself, therefore, it is on the whole wise that adults should take cognisance of acts of theft, and deal with them in a manner which prevents the other children from wreaking vengeance on their own account. An adequate respect for the property of others is hardly possible except through the creation of a conditioned reflex. Under the influence of temptation the chance of detection always appears less than it is, and the person to whom thieving is an active possibility is hardly likely to go through life without yielding to the temptation sufficiently often to be caught in the end.

Another respect in which, to my mind, many apostles of freedom go astray, is that they fail to recognise sufficiently the importance of routine in the life of the young. I do not mean that a routine should be rigid and absolute: there should be days when it is varied, such as Christmas Day and holidays. But even these variations should, on the whole, be expected by the child. A life of uncertainty is nervously exhausting at all times, but especially in youth. The child derives a sense of security from knowing more or less what is going to happen day by day. He wishes his world to be safe, and subject to the reign of law. Our belief in the uniformity of nature is largely the projection upon the cosmos of the child's desire for routine in the nursery. Adventurousness and courage are highly desirable qualities, but they are most easily developed against a background of fundamental security.

A further point in favour of a large element of routine is that children find it both tiring and boring to have to choose their own occupation at all odd times. They prefer that at many times the initiative should not be theirs, and that their own choice should be confined within a framework imposed by friendly adults. Children, like grown-ups, enjoy the sense of achievement derived from mastering a difficulty, but this requires a consistency of effort of which few are capable without some outside encouragement. The capacity for consistent self-direction is one

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of the most valuable that a human being can possess. It is practically unknown in young children, and is never developed either by a very rigid discipline or by complete freedom. Very rigid discipline, such as that of soldiers in war-time, makes a man incapable of acting without the goad of external command. On the other hand, complete freedom throughout childhood does not teach him to resist the solicitations of a momentary impulse: he does not acquire the capacity of concentrating upon one matter when he is interested in another, or of resisting pleasures because they will cause fatigue that will interfere with subsequent work. The strengthening of the will demands, therefore, a somewhat subtle mixture of freedom and discipline, and is destroyed by an excess of either.

What is important as imposing limitations upon the desirable amount of discipline is that all training should have the co-operation of the child's will, though not of every passing impulse. Every child who is surrounded by friendly adults is conscious at bottom that he himself is rather foolish, and is grateful for a fair amount of guidance from those whom he can trust to be really concerned with his good, and not only with their own convenience or power. Athletes submit themselves to discipline as a matter of course, and young people whose desire for intellectual achievement is as great as the athlete's desire for success in his field will be equally ready to submit themselves to the necessary discipline. But in an atmosphere where all discipline is thought evil, it will not occur to young people that voluntary submission of this sort is an essential of almost every kind of success. Difficult success as an ideal should be present to the mind of the young if they are not to become wayward and futile. But there are few to whom it will occur in an environment where freedom is absolute.

The use of authority as opposed to persuasion can be reduced almost to nothing where the right sort of adult is in charge of not too large a number of children. Take, for example, such a matter as kindness. I do not think that precept or punishment can do anything to produce a kindly disposition, though it can restrain overt acts of cruelty. A kindly disposition requires, on the one hand, instinctive happiness, and on the other hand the example of kindly behaviour on the part of adults. The mere teaching of kindness as a moral principle is, to my mind, almost useless.

It is of the highest importance that whatever discipline may exist should not involve more than a minimum of emotional restraint, for a child who feels himself thwarted in any important way is liable to develop various undesirable characteristics the nature of which will depend upon his strength of character. If he is strong, he will become a whining hypocrite. Discipline, therefore, while it cannot be entirely absent, should be reduced as much as is compatible with the training of decent and competent human beings.

The matter of instruction is the crux of the whole question. Experience has persuaded me, somewhat to my surprise, that it is possible to give adequate instruction, and to produce highly educated human beings, without imposing any obligation to be present at lessons. To do this requires a combination of circumstances which is not at present possible on a large scale. It requires among adults a genuine and spontaneous interest in intellectual pursuits. It requires small classes. It requires sympathy and tact and skill in the teacher. And it requires an environment in which it is possible to turn a child out of a class and tell him to go and play, if he wishes to be in class solely for the purpose of creating a disturbance. It will be a long time before these conditions can be realised in ordinary schools, and therefore, for the present, compulsory attendance in class is likely to be necessary in the great majority of cases.



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There are some who argue that if a child is left alone he will teach himself to read and write and so forth from a wish not to be inferior to his neighbours, and that therefore absence of compulsion causes at most a delay of a year or two in the acquisition of knowledge. I think that this position is unconsciously parasitic. In a world where every other child learns to read and write, it is probable that any given child will in time wish to escape the sense of inferiority which would be produced by ignorance. But in a world where all children escaped compulsion, there would soon be no occasion for this sense of inferiority, and each generation would be somewhat more ignorant than its predecessor. Very few children have a spontaneous impulse to learn the multiplication table. While their neighbours are compelled to learn it, they may, for very shame, feel that they ought to learn it too, but in a community where no child was obliged to learn it there would, before long, be only a few erudite pedants who would know what six times nine is.

The acquisition of concrete knowledge is pleasant to most children: if they live on a farm they will watch the farmer's operations and get to know all about them. But abstract knowledge is loved by very few, and yet it is abstract knowledge that makes a civilised community possible. Preservation of a civilised community demands, therefore, some method of causing children to behave in a manner which is not natural to them. It may be possible to substitute coaxing for compulsion but it is not possible to leave the matter to the unaided operation of nature. The idea of education as merely affording opportunities for natural growth is not, I think, one which can be upheld by a person who realises the complexity of modern societies. It is, of course, possible to say that this complexity is regrettable, and that it would be better to return to a simpler way of life, but unfortunately the process of so returning would involve the death by starvation of a very large percentage of the population. This alternative is so horrible that we are practically committed to the whole complex apparatus of the modern industrial world, and being so committed, we are also bound to fit our children to take their part in carrying it on. The negative theory of education, therefore, while it has many important elements of truth, and is largely valid so far as the emotions are concerned, cannot be accepted in its entirety as regards intellectual and technical training. Where these are concerned, something more positive is required.

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