Notes on John Locke’s views on education

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Abstract

John Locke’s views on education are based on his empirical theory of human knowledge in his famous work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”. When born, the mind of the child is like a blank slate — “tabula rasa”, to be filled later with the data derived from sensory experience. It logically ensues that education plays a crucial role in the moral development and social integration of any human being. Education means shaping according to each individual’s temperament and skills, exercised without brutality, but in a rigorous and pragmatic manner.

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1. Introduction

John Locke (1632-1704) is one of the most important thinkers of the world; some have even considered him as the most notable English philosopher: in any case, his book “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1690) is still arousing the interest of those concerned with the field of the philosophical reflection and especially the history of Western philosophy. Perhaps older or younger experts have been attracted mainly by his “realism”, the passion with which he supported the cause of sensory knowledge.

The main thesis of the famous empiricist is well-known: “nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu”. He rejects the doctrine regarding the existence of innate ideas, claiming that at birth our mind is like a white paper – “tabula rasa” – which is gradually inscribed with the data deriving from experience during our whole life. Locke wishes to underline the fact that our entire knowledge derives from experience through sensation and reflection.

2. Locke’s Educational Theory

This conception on the origins of knowledge is older, being also present in a specific form in the Greek philosophy, viz. in Aristotle’s “De anima” (“On the Soul”), 429b29-430a2, who could have taken it from his magister Plato (see, in this respect, the Dialogues “Theaetetus” and “Philebus”): “Or in the way that to be acted upon according to something common has been distinguished before, that the mind is in potentiality somehow the intelligible objects but in actuality nothing until it thinks. Thus it must be just as in a tablet in which nothing exists in actuality written down, which occurs in the case of the mind” (Polansky, 2007, pp. 453).

To the issue under discussion it is less relevant where John Locke found his basic principles, as it is more important that the theory under debate has a certain type of educational echoes, in the most direct manner possible. If at birth the child’s mind is devoid of any ideas, then the educator has a major role in shaping the personality of his pupil, whom he has to transform into a model of behaviour, training him step by step to face the demands of real life to the best of his abilities.

To investigate the opinions of the English philosopher our focus lies first on his work “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” (1692), a “treatise” on the education of a gentleman which one may place among the most important books on the philosophy of education in the Modern Age. The child is educated under the auspices of moral values to do good and avoid evil; or in forming moral conduct the educator cannot consider some alleged moral dispositions that the youngster may possess, i.e. a certain natural tendency towards good that would somehow be part of the educated “hereditary” endowments, as it were. The pedagogue has to build the child’s moral profile from scratch, to make him adapt to the demands of social life, searching for the best way to harmonise his interests to the interests of the community he lives in.

This may only happen to the extent in which the adult is conversant with the child’s psychology and his peculiar nature, as well as human nature in general. In the good old Protestant tradition, John Locke evinces the importance of discipline in human life and as a means of shaping human personality: education is supposed to shape mainly because the young being is malleable. Parents are urged to prove moderation in showing their love for the young ones, as John Locke favours the rational control of parental affection: a parent who loves his child wisely does not love the child’s mistakes, and thus does not allow him to overtly display rebellion. In fact, Locke reproves the indulgence shown by many adults where their offspring are concerned: “The great mistake I have observed in people’s breeding their children has been, that this has not been taken care enough of in its due season; that the mind has not been made obedient to rules, and pliant to reason, when at first it was most tender, most easy to be bowed. Parents being wisely ordained by nature to love their children, are very apt, if reason watch not that natural affection very warily; are apt I say, to let it run into fondness. They love their little ones […] but they often with them cherish their faults too. They must not be crossed, forsooth; they must be permitted to have their wills in all things; and they being in their infancies not capable of great vices, their parents think they may safely enough indulge their little irregularities, and make themselves sport with that pretty perverseness, which they think well enough becomes that innocent age” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 28-29; Morère, 2005; Lurbe, 2006).

The stress laid on discipline and submission is an important element in the whole discourse of the Reformation spirituality, from Luther and Calvin to Immanuel Kant: the German philosopher, if one were to discuss only him, considers that man is the only being who needs education and may be educated, discipline being an indispensable
and defining element in the development of our personality: discipline makes man what he is, humanizes him by determining him to dominate his animal impulses (Zöller & Louden, 2007, pp. 437; Sullivan, 1989, pp. 293).

Unlike the animal, who needs food, warmth and protection to grow and mature, man also requires care, and this supplementary need sets him apart from all the other living beings. Or, it is also John Locke’s vision that parents and teachers are called to take note of the peculiar nature of man: any treatise of pedagogy or philosophy of education is also intrinsically a treatise of anthroplogy.

It would be virtually impossible to accurately grasp the English philosopher’s perception of the pedagogical act without the accurate comprehension of his epistemology centred around the rejection of innate ideas. To get the accurate picture of the manner in which John Locke sees the role of education in modelling human manners it is not enough to have a careful reading of his work “Some Thoughts Concerning Education”: Locke also makes some interesting assertions in “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”: Thus, he refuses to admit that an individual at the beginning of his life would possess any sort of intuitive or spontaneous knowledge of the fundamental moral values, hence the educator has the noble and arduous task of building a second nature in man, making him a noble superior being. In the mind there are no innate (original) principles or primary notions — this idea was supported by Locke with arguments that are also relevant to his pedagogical doctrine: “For, first, it is evident, that all children and idiots have not the least apprehension or thought of them. And the want of that is enough to destroy that universal assent which must needs be the necessary concomitant of all innate truths: it seeming to me near a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul, which it perceives or understands not: imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind’s perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible” (Locke, 1894, pp. 40).

Education means discipline, moral good is closely linked to a certain refusal to freely indulge in one’s own desires. It is necessary that a child should be taught to master and contain his instinctual side, as a man is strong not if he manages to dominate others, but his own instincts. This is clearly a specific trait of the Protestant puritan “Capitalism” (1905). Genuine education may not be dissociated from the ideal of a freely assumed asceticism, who therefore the needs of his fellow humans. People usually train their pets when young, so that to be able to use them properly, yet they are not wise enough to do the same with their offspring, unreasonably allowing the children’s perverse habits to become more rooted as they grow. Or, grass is harder to pull out from a dry land — if the bad habits are not corrected at a tender age, the risk is they can never be completely removed (Adamson, 1922, pp. 29).

As previously seen, Locke is very keen on disciplining children, i.e. forming their moral character, but discipline is not a purpose in itself, but a tool. Disciplining does not mean brutality, useless sternness, despotic attitude, and the parents and teachers are urged to take a nuanced approach in their relations with the young, taking into account their age and individual characteristics, which is also a principle in use in modern pedagogy. “If this be begun betimes, and they accustom themselves early to silence their desires, this useful habit will settle in them; and, as they come to grow up in age and discretion, they may be allowed greater liberty; when reason comes to speak in them, and not passion. For whenever reason would speak, it should be hearkened to. But, as they should never be heard, when they speak for any particular thing they would have, unless it be first proposed to them; so they should always be heard, and fairly and kindly answered, when they ask after anything they would know, and desire to be informed about. Curiosity should be as carefully cherished in children, as other appetites suppressed” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 85).

Educators are urged to carefully inquire into the children’s personality in order to put to good use their positive natural tendencies, their quality of rational beings apt to perform virtuous acts. The superior, civilised conduct of an individual is mostly explainable by the education received; this education mainly relies on man’s propensity towards knowledge, the young people’s natural desire to properly understand the world they live in. In this case, the children’s natural curiosity constitutes a strong ally in the adults’ educational effort. At the same time, Locke reiterates that the young should also benefit from the freedom to show their curiosity: the adults are supposed to support the young people’s need to increase their knowledge, patiently answering all their questions.

It is only this way, i.e. stimulating the young on the path of knowledge, that children are sheltered from passing through life as “dull and useless creatures” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 93). Locke does not refrain from offering practical advice on this matter. He requires the adults to provide clear answers, suitable to the understanding abilities and educational level of each child: such answers should not be too scientific, but not trivial either. By providing the suitable answers to the questions of the ones we educate we may have the chance to see their development and the
surprising progress they make. Man is by nature thirsty for knowledge, this is the very premise any educator should start from; the English philosopher’s remark is virtually poetic: “for knowledge is grateful to the understanding as light to the eyes” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 93).

Children are thrilled to see that the adults take their questions seriously and offer interesting and challenging answers. It is common sense, but unfortunately many parents and teachers in our modern age tend to neglect their children’s requests. Locke repeatedly urges his readers to pay attention to the manner of quenching the thirst for knowledge and the interest in the novelty displayed by the ones who haven’t reached maturity: if they are not taken seriously, and always told the truth, the results will be really unfortunate. “As children’s inquiries are not to be slighted, so also great care is to be taken that they never receive deceitful and eluding answers. They easily perceive when they are slighted or deceived, and quickly learn the trick of neglect, dissimulation and falsehood, which they observe others to make use of. We are not to entrench upon truth in any conversation, but least of all with children; since, if we play false with them, we not only deceive their expectation, and hinder their knowledge, but corrupt their innocence, and teach them the worst of vices” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 94).

The behavioural and cognitive planes are closely related, it is not enough to teach the truth, to convey it by words, as it is also necessary to exemplify it factually. John Locke’s conceptions are remarkably pertinent and universally valid: the adults should be role models for their offspring, treating the latter with the respect they deserve: “Maxima debetur pueris reverentia”. The English philosopher brings forth the principle of personal example, as children learn by imitation. It is not allowed to operate with two sets of different principles in education, in other words it is damaging and unfair, as well as hypocritical to ask others to observe principles that we are not able to observe ourselves, opines John Locke. “You must do nothing before him, which you would not have him imitate. If anything 'scape you, which you would have pass for a fault in him, he will be sure to shelter himself under your example, and how then you will be able to come at him, to correct it in the right way, I do not easily see. And if you will punish him for it, he cannot look on it as a thing which reason condemns, since you practise it; but he will be apt to interpret it the peevishness and arbitrary imperiousness of a father which without any ground for it, would deny his son the liberty and pleasures he takes himself” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 55-56).

Education requires order, voluntary submission to a certain way of life. Generally speaking, children are taught to avoid errors and willingly and persistently do good. Behaviour correction is achieved by rewards and penalties, but teachers are required to take into account a very important psychological aspect: it is fitting that the adults take note of the young’s dispositions, taking care to cultivate the taste for desirable acts, i.e. acts that are morally positive. Children are naturally inclined towards varied and pleasant activities, which are age-specific, hence the learning tasks should be appropriately adjusted so that not to arouse disgust. Forcefully disciplining children is counterproductive, it is therefore much more recommendable that teachers take into account the children’s peculiar need to relax through play and physical exercise.

Play is for children a space where they can manifest their personal freedom, so brutal constraint would be an obstacle to their harmonious development: human nature does not just need adjusting, but also improving (Adamson, 1922, pp. 93; Tarkov, 1999, pp. 109). The English philosopher similarly focuses on the manner in which parents should relate to their children: in Locke’s view, the adults owe it to the young to care about their mental and physical health. In fact, in the opening lines of his book “Some Thoughts Concerning Education” Locke stresses by means of Juvenal’s words the interdependence between the physical and the mental nature of man: “mens sana in corpore sano” (Mayor, 2010, pp. 52). To man it is of utmost importance to have his psychosomatic health, which is closely related to a virtuous way of life, and therefore to happiness. This vision deriving from Antiquity is fully embraced by John Locke: “A sound mind in a, sound body, is a short but full description of a happy state in this world: he that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for anything else. Men’s happiness or misery is most part of their own making. He whose mind directs not wisely, will never take the right way; and he whose body is crazy and feeble, will never be able to advance in it” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 25).

This psychosomatic health actually constitutes a privileged objective of any genuine educational approach. Those who are born physically and spiritually strong are a minority, as most of our fellow humans are good or bad, useful or useless, according to the education they received. People are not equal, as they do not benefit from the same education. Although the mind is the most important part of our being, it is not a good idea to neglect the body: through his robust physical constitution man may successfully cope with the daily activities and fatigue, bravely facing all sorts of hardships and adapting to his environment.
The English philosopher considers that the parents who excessively shelter their children from bad weather and do not allow them to get used to the cold are making a huge mistake, as the children thus become sensitive to climate change. Locke sometimes gives the impression that he promotes the idea of Spartan education: if he is used to the cold and cold water from an early age, the child has the chance to strengthen his body, becoming somehow immune to disease. That is why Locke also supports the beneficial character of swimming: it has saved a great many people in time.

The British empiricist was mostly interested in a better adaptation of the young people to their natural and social environment. Civilised manners are meant not only to reveal the moral character and good breeding of an individual, but also to provide an optimal integration in the community. In Locke’s works, virtue seems to refer to an excellence which is simultaneously physical and spiritual-moral, aimed at ensuring a perfection beyond the confines of this world: “I place Virtue as the first and most necessary of those endowments that belong to a man or a gentleman, as absolutely requisite to make him valued and beloved by others, acceptable or tolerable to himself; without that, I think, he will be happy neither in this nor the other world” (Adamson, 1922, pp. 105).

Virtue constitutes an indispensable ingredient in the preservation of civil order (Forster, 2005, pp. 190) and the stability of society, also possessing a value which is not strictly moral and religious, but also instrumental. At the same time he shows that a moral system devoid of religious support does not have the authority it would require to impose itself in a community. In the Christian vision, virtue is inextricably linked to piety, and from the very beginning religion itself has promoted the ideal of a virtuous life laid on the solid foundation of observing the Ten Commandments. Hence the idea that religion disposes of an important social and political role as it constantly urges towards assuming responsibilities in the public and private sphere.

Virtue appears as the defining quality of an individual, making him most sensitive to the needs of the others. “This ethic, particularly in its elements of liberality and civility, will be connected to Locke’s own frequently-avowed social identity as a gentleman who was concerned at many points in his life with emphasising the responsibilities of service to others involved in a ‘Gentleman’s calling’, and with performing these duties himself” (Marshall, 1994, pp. xvii). This virtue so praised by Locke is somehow synonymous to honour and justice which no gentleman can live without: virtue is an ideal imposed by society and accessible to the individual through education. In Aristotle’s manner, Locke identifies virtue in the behaviour of an individual who is interested in the common good, not just his own advantage.

It may be stated that John Locke had no difficulty in associating moral virtue to a social, and especially spiritual aristocracy, to righteous people, who are vertical not just physically, but also metaphysically. The distance between virtue and vice is equal to the one between right and wrong; virtue means moral Rectitude, i.e. human perfection, being manifest in doing good: virtue has a wide sphere, including “wisdom, good breeding, and learning”. As a result, the following assertion on the philosophy of the British philosopher should not come as a surprise: “Virtue is perhaps the most important topic in his work on education” (Yolton, 1993, pp. 316; Wolterstorff, 1996, pp. 139).

The great thinkers of the 17th century were greatly concerned with this issue of virtue that they related to the Christian doctrine (Forstrom, 2010). Virtue may be acquired by learning and especially by training (Ward, 2010, pp. 185). It presupposes self-denial and perseverance in accomplishing all that is positive in point of ethics. Man is able to acquire a virtuous conduct by education as he is sensitive to the manner in which his fellow humans relate to his persona, to his public image: the others’ praise triggers pleasure, while the others’ criticism produces shame. That is why instead of motivating children to perform their tasks by rewards and penalties, it would be better for educators to appeal to the children’s self-esteem: “If by these Means you can come once to shame them out of their Faults […] and make them in Love with the Pleasure of being well thought on, you may turn them as you please, and they will be in love with all the ways of Virtue” (Anstey, 2003, pp. 114).

The English philosopher stresses the idea of virtue, which is highly relevant for his entire philosophy. Without this notion it is difficult to understand the connection between his epistemology, pedagogy, and his doctrine, both political, and moral-religious. Virtue is the most important quality that a gentleman possesses, being organically linked to the knowledge of God – the Supreme Being and the creator of the world.

Locke was not concerned only with the field of religious education. In his view, children should be taught to read by playing at an extremely early age, once they have learned how to speak. He recommends in this respect Aesopus’s Fables, in an illustrated edition. The moment they are able to speak their native tongue, children should start studying French. After two years of studying French, they should start learning Latin. Locke also recommends
the study of geography, arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, chronology, history, rhetoric, and logic (Aldrich, 1994, pp. 61-76).

If education is so important to each individual, then the tutor should possess certain qualities enabling him to successfully accomplish the noble tasks assigned to him. The tutor is sort of a second parent to the child, he needs to be well-mannered, calm, and cautious especially in point of administering punishments. To have authority over the child, he should be treated with respect by the parents, not to be looked down upon by the young generation. The tutor’s behaviour should be exemplary, in perfect concord with the concepts he teaches, as otherwise he would only pervert his pupil: evil deeds are easier to imitate than good advice without personal examples, supported by appropriate facts (Adamson, 1922, pp. 70-71).

A good tutor with all these qualities is hard to find, admits Locke. He constantly resumes this idea referring to the qualities of a tutor: professionalism and sobriety, moderation and politeness. Moderation is the defining element of any virtue, as without moderation everything turns into vice. This is an idea which has dominated Western thinking since the Antiquity: the tutor is extremely important as he can teach the child a series of things which do not exist in books, mainly pertaining to a better adaptation of man to his environment, the requirements of living in a community made up of different people, some good, some with ulterior reasons.

3. Conclusions

When the English philosopher describes the behavioural profile of the tutor, he implicitly praises the calling of the pedagogue. “The great work of a governor is to fashion the carriage, and form the mind; to settle in his pupil good habits, and the principles of virtue and wisdom; to give him, by little and little, a view of mankind; and work him into a love and imitation of what is excellent and praiseworthy; and in the prosecution of it, to give him vigour, activity, and industry. The studies which he sets him upon, are but, as it were, the exercises of his faculties, and employment of his time, to keep him from sauntering and idleness, to teach him application, and accustom him to take pains, and to give him some little taste of what his own industry must perfect” (Adamson, 1922:75-76). In these lines it is obvious that many of John Locke’s pedagogical ideas have remained valid up to our modern times, being worth studying by parents and teachers alike, i.e. all the adults who aim at turning children into moral, responsible people.

References