

John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*: A Teacher's Perspective

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Presented at the NEH Philosophers of Education Summer Seminar

Boston University

August 1, 2014

John Locke was born in 1632 and died in 1704. He was a lifelong bachelor, and he did not father any children. His most important writing on the topic of education, entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, was based on a series of letters he wrote to his friend and political ally, Sir Edward Clarke, beginning in 1684, when Clarke's son was eight years old. The *Thoughts* was largely finished by 1688 and was first made publicly available in 1693. In the book's dedication, Locke states that he is publishing it only with great reluctance. His name does not appear on the title page of the first edition. Locke seems to have been anxious about how his *Thoughts* would be received. As it turned out, the book was extremely successful, and Locke took credit for it by placing his name on the title page of the second edition. The *Thoughts* would stay in print, going through two more editions in Locke's lifetime. By the end of the 17th century, the book had been translated into Dutch, French, Swedish, German and Italian (Axtell, 1968, pp. 13-17).

Why was the *Thoughts* so successful? The truth is, Locke had more experience with children than a short biographical outline might suggest. In his student days, Locke tutored 13-18 year olds at Christ Church, Oxford. When he later went to Exeter House, he was put in charge of the Earl of Shaftesbury's 15 year old son. As the family physician, Locke became an experienced obstetrician and pediatrician. One of the babies he delivered was Shaftesbury's grandson, who later in life wrote to Locke

affectionately, describing himself as Locke's "foster son." As James L. Axtell points out in his study of Locke's educational writings, Locke appears not to have consulted the popular educational books of his time. Instead, Locke consulted his own experience (Axtell, 1968, p. 65).

Some Thoughts Concerning Education is now over 300 years old, but the book's content seems extraordinarily fresh. It deserves to be more often read by educators and scholars of Locke's philosophy. As Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov point out, the *Thoughts* serves as a link between the epistemology and psychology of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and the liberal political theory of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke, 1693/1996, pp. xvi-xvii). The "blank slate" theory of the mind Locke puts forward in the *Essay* is clarified and qualified in important respects by the educational recommendations given in the *Thoughts*. Similarly, the revolutionary liberalism which Locke champions in the *Second Treatise* depends for its establishment and perpetuation upon the qualities of self-control and independence of mind which the *Thoughts* is designed to instill.

What can teachers learn from John Locke? In this essay, I will explore the argument of his *Thoughts*, not just because it is helpful for understanding his philosophy as a whole, but because it provides sound practical advice which is likely to be useful even today.

I begin with a common misunderstanding of Locke's philosophy. For most readers, Locke is associated with the image of the human mind as a "blank slate" or *tabula rasa*, which is empty until it has been "imprinted" with the marks of experience. In fact, as Steven Pinker points out in his critique of the blank slate and other "sacred doctrines" of modern intellectual life, Locke uses a slightly different image in the *Essay*:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the

materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE (Locke, 1690/1947, p. 26).

As is so often the case in the history of ideas, Locke's original description of the blank slate theory—or perhaps we should say the “white paper” theory—bears little resemblance to what it later would become in the hands of other authors. Here in the *Essay*, Locke is criticizing the notion that human beings rely, in their reasoning, upon certain “innate ideas” which are available prior to experience. If innate ideas really did exist, they would constitute a special claim to knowledge. But Locke is a democrat—epistemologically as well as politically. In other words, he believes that while some may have more knowledge than others, and some may have more skill in reasoning than others, everyone's ideas have the same source—that is, experience—and they must be judged, ultimately, by same standards.

Locke is *not* asserting that human beings are, at birth, identical in their temperaments and capacities. Nor is he claiming that education has an unlimited power to remake the human mind by writing new characters upon it. Yet both of these doctrines have come to be associated with the idea of a blank slate, which itself has come to serve as a “sacred scripture” on a wide variety of practical matters. The contemporary blank slate theorist, according to Pinker, asserts the following set of moral, political, and educational beliefs:

[A]ny differences we see among races, ethnic groups, sexes, and individuals come not from differences in their innate constitution but from differences in their experiences. Change the experiences—by reforming parenting, education, the media, and social rewards—and you can change the person. Underachievement, poverty, and antisocial behavior can be ameliorated; indeed, it is irresponsible not to do so (Pinker, 2002, p. 6).

Locke's *Thoughts* shows quite clearly that he was *not* a blank slate theorist in this sense of the term. In fact, Locke argues that it is the responsibility of the educator to take heed of each child's individual temperament in order to discover what is

[. . .] adapted to his capacity and anyway suited to the child's natural genius and constitution; for that too must be considered in a right education. We must not hope wholly to change their original tempers nor make the gay pensive and grave, nor the melancholy sportive, without spoiling them. God has stamped certain characters upon men's minds, which, like their shapes, may perhaps be a little mended but can hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 41).

Summarizing this point, Locke writes that each person's temperament is as individual as his face. (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 76) This view suggests a prudent caution about the capability of education to remake the human individual. It is possible to make some changes around the margins: students' minds "may perhaps be a little mended," but they can "hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary," and the likely result of attempting to do so is to "spoil" the students' original tempers.

In advising the teacher to listen, to study the pupil's "natural genius and condition," and to set goals which are "adapted to his capacity," Locke seems startlingly "progressive." But there is also a good deal which is anti-progressive or "traditionalist" in Locke's book. His prudent caution about the power of education to remake the human individual may serve as a corrective to some of the excesses of modern educational progressivism. Locke is far from imagining that the student is "human clay" to be molded at the teacher's discretion. I would argue that one of the great pleasures of reading Locke comes from watching him transcend many of today's hardened educational battle-lines. He is not content to let the child develop as he chooses. Locke does not think that the goal of education should be to erase students' differences in temperament, but rather to bring each student's distinctive temperament to as

close an approach as possible to Locke's own idea of human excellence. The goal, in a word, is to make the student into a "gentleman."

Recent discussions of education have tended to focus on the curriculum. Thus Locke's focus on temperament may surprise modern readers. The structure of the *Thoughts* suggests that education is *not* primarily a matter of curricular content. Discussion of what Locke calls "learning" is relegated almost to the end of the book, to a mere 48 out of 216 sections—less than one quarter of the whole. Locke, who was himself a very learned man, admits that he has chosen a strange and surprising way to organize his book on education:

You will wonder, perhaps, that I put learning last, especially if I tell you that I think it the least part. This may seem strange in the mouth of a bookish man; and this making usually the chief if not only bustle and stir about children, this being almost that alone which is thought on when people talk of education, makes it a greater paradox (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 112).

The solution to Locke's paradox is to recall that, in his view, it is more important to create a virtuous man than it is to create a learned man:

I imagine you would think him a very foolish fellow that should not value a virtuous or wise man infinitely before a great scholar. Not but that I think learning a great help to both [virtue and wisdom] in well-disposed minds; but yet it must be confessed also that in others not so disposed it helps them only to be the more foolish or worse men (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 113).

I will give Locke's discussion of learning short shrift in this essay. His thoughts on curricular content are interesting and worthwhile, but limitations of space and time prevent me from exploring them in detail. Instead, I will focus on Locke's idea of the gentleman.

So who is the gentleman? What is he like? Before answering these questions it is necessary to correct two common misconceptions. The first is that, in speaking of the *gentleman*, Locke shows himself to be irredeemably sexist. When Locke was writing, the different roles and occupations of men and women could be assumed. On the other hand, their different roles and occupations cannot be assumed today. So perhaps we can read Locke's argument more generally than he intended it: our goal today (one might say) should be to educate gentlemen *and* gentlewomen.

Interestingly enough, this seems to be in keeping with the true spirit of the *Thoughts*. Sex differences were not a major focus of Locke's educational philosophy. He can be contrasted, in this regard, with Rousseau, who proposes *very* different types of education for Émile and Sophie. James L. Axtell observes that Locke's original correspondence with the Clarke family, which formed the basis for the *Thoughts*, concerned the education of their sons *and* their daughters (Axtell, 1968, p. 8). It seems that most of Locke's advice is meant to apply equally to boys and to girls—with a few exceptions. Locke says that it should be easy to figure out what to do in the minority of cases where his advice is not appropriate for girls (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 13).

Another common misconception is that Locke is an elitist. To be sure, the *Thoughts* describe a program of education which could be made available only to a small minority of privileged young people in Locke's time, and which, for all of the technological and social advances of the past 300 years, probably would be no easier to make widely available today—if for no other reason than Locke's expressed preference for one-on-one tutoring.

So perhaps Locke *is* an elitist, in a sense. Still, it could be argued that the education of the elite had, and always will have, a civic importance which far exceeds their numbers within society. Anticipating elite theory, Locke writes, “[. . .] if those of that rank [i.e. gentlemen] are by their education once set right, they will quickly bring all the rest into order” (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 8). Thus Locke may

hope to reform English society in general by reforming the education of England's elite. He states quite explicitly that he is publishing his *Thoughts* because he hopes that it will do some public good (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 7).

Locke's friend, Pierre Coste, who translated the *Thoughts* into French, has an interesting response to the charge of elitism. In the preface to his French edition, he writes:

It is certain that this work was particularly designed for the education of gentlemen: but this does not prevent its serving also for the education of all sorts of children, of whatever class they are: for if you except that which the author says about exercises that a young gentleman ought to learn, nearly all the rules that he gives, are universal (Axtell, 1968, p. 52).

In other words, omit the sections of the *Thoughts* which discuss fencing and the like, and the educational advice is pretty well appropriate for children of any social class.

We return, then, to Locke's notion of the gentleman—or gentlewoman. At the beginning of the *Thoughts*, Locke describes his goal as a person who is healthy in mind and in body: *mens sana in corpore sano*. He argues that this goal is within reach for most of us. A select few with "happy constitutions" may achieve it without much help from education. A few will be held back by sickness or circumstances beyond their control. But "men's happiness or misery is most part of their own making" and the crucial element is education. He concludes, "of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 10). This is, I think, a reasonable middle position.

Locke warns specifically that the "clay cottage" of the student's body must not be neglected, though "our main care [will] be about what is inside"—that is, the student's mind. Perhaps a sound body is, in some sense, prior to a sound mind. Locke, was a physician by training and, while he was not exactly

a sickly man, he had experienced enough health problems to appreciate the blessing of good health, and to understand the obstacle that ill health could pose to any serious program of study.

Thus, prior to the discussion of the curriculum, we have approximately 30 sections discussing the cultivation of bodily health, which focus on the preservation or cultivation of a vigorous constitution in an already healthy, or at least not sickly, student. Locke's most distinctive advice in this part of the *Thoughts* is to toughen the student's body against pain and hardship through a Stoic process of gradual acclimation. The goal of this is not merely to prepare the student to enjoy the happiness made possible by good health, or to enable him to engage in the business of adult life, but, as becomes apparent when looking ahead the next major section of the text, for the student to achieve practical independence from the demands of the body:

[. . .] the great principle and foundation of all virtue and worth is placed in this, that a man is able to *deny himself* his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason directs as best though appetite lean the other way (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 25).

If there is one thing which is brilliantly clear about Locke's discussion of children, if there is one guiding idea behind all of Locke's educational recommendations, it is that *children are essentially spirited beings*. This Locke calls the "true secret" to their education (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 33). This is also the key to their miseducation and many, if not most, of their acquired vices. The spiritedness of children—indeed, of *all* human beings—is a powerful and morally ambiguous force.

In other words, self-denial is not an end in itself, but a means to enable the student to follow "what reason directs as best," even when it is opposed to his inclinations. The overarching goal of achieving independence from the inclinations dictates Locke's specific advice regarding the appetites of the body and the mind. Locke's objective is to cultivate a disposition that is capable of choosing – to use a phrase popular at West Point—the "hard right" over the "easy wrong".

To put it in contemporary terms, this is a program of “character education.” But it is character education with a specific end-goal in mind. And, as I hope I have shown, the gentleman and gentlewoman are not just well-mannered and polite, but self-controlled and self-overcoming. I have said that I will avoid discussing Locke’s specific curricular recommendations. I will only note, by way of a conclusion, that, Locke’s gentleman and gentlewoman are broadly educated, and, what is more important, receptive to all the sciences and all the branches of learning. “The business of education,” Locke writes in a later work, “is not [. . .] to make [the students] perfect in any one of the sciences, but so to open and dispose their minds as may best make them capable of any, when they shall apply themselves to it” (Locke, 1693/1996, p. 192).

This is, I think, a beautiful goal, and a suitable spot to conclude our reflections on John Locke’s *Thoughts*.

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