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Libertarian Education

Sébastien Faure

1910

When it comes into the world, when its existence is like a blank sheet upon which nothing has yet be written, the child is neither good nor bad. He is both. The heir to all preceding generations, he carries within himself, in germ, all the qualities and all the shortcomings of his ancestors; all their virtues and all their vices, all their strengths and all their weaknesses, all their ignorance and all their learning, all their savagery and all their indulgence, all their defeats and all their victories, all their greatness and all their pettiness, all their courage and all their cowardice, all their rebelliousness and all their subservience, all their advances and all their set-backs, all their sublimity and all their wretchedness.

He is as capable of the most sensitive actions as of the most irrational acts; he is fitted for the noblest acts as well as for the vilest; he can climb the heights or plumb the depths.

Education and social surroundings will turn this little amorphous, inconsistent, frail and eminently impressionable creature into what he will become thereafter.

Strictness makes for deceivers, faint-hearted and cowards. It is deadly to openness, confidence and real courage. It erects dangerous barriers of mutual mistrust between Educator and child:

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it sours the hearts of the little ones and alienates them from the affections of their elders; it introduces a Master-Slave relationship rather than a Friend-Friend relationship between Educator and child.

The result of a regimen of constraint is regulation of the child's every move; consequently, it leads to classification of all of the latter under the headings mandatory and forbidden, the rewarded and the punished; for there would be no constraint if the child was not required to conform to prescriptions and prohibitions, and if abiding by the former and breaching the latter did not bring consequences in the form of reward or punishment as the case may be.

"If you do such a thing you will be rewarded."

"If you do something else, you will be punished."

That is the whole story .

The constraint system exercises none of the child's nobler faculties; it makes no appeal to his reasoning, does not speak to his heart, has nothing to say to his dignity and nothing to his conscience.

It does not prompt any high-minded feelings in him; moves him to no purposeful effort; arouses no noble aspiration; prompts no unselfish impulse; and no productive exercise.

It does not focus the considered attention of the child on immediate or longer-term, direct or indirect consequences for himself and others, beyond this implication: reward in one instance and punishment in the other.

It leaves no room for initiative. Seeing two avenues of action open to him, avenues at the entrance to which two signposts have been carefully placed, one reading, in curt and trenchant terms "What must be done; the avenue of reward," while the other displays this inscription "What must not be done; the avenue of punishment," he struggles to decide whether the action asked of him

ages him to concoct, with regard to things about which he frets, false notions about which he will consult with his friends or neighbours. Nor will there be any shortage of people to misdirect him later, by which time there will be no time left to step in and brief him in all candour. So why conceal from him something that he will inevitably discover at some point? This is an unforgivable lack of foresight.

True morality consists of shedding the requisite light upon such matters, a light that the child will some day be able to find for himself. Better that those who love him should provide it than those who do not know him

is to be classified among the musts or the must-nots, without both-ering to wonder why he should act thus without the course upon which he embarks bringing him any other satisfaction than some reward to be collected or punishment to be avoided.

Undetectably, this constraint system produces grey, drab, colourless, insipid beings bereft of all determination, passion or personality; a slavish, cowardly, sheepish breed, incapable of manly or sublime deeds, the execution of which presupposes and requires a dose of liveliness, fire, independence and enthusiasm, but instead one perfectly capable of cruelty and abjection, especially in circumstances where personal accountability is eclipsed by mob activity.

The system of freedom leads to quite different outcomes.

It is characterized by risk throughout the entire learning period. So, at the outset, when the child is pretty much ignorant of all the consequences implicit in his actions, the educator bombards him with warnings, advice, explanations and the thousand ingenious ways in which his support can be fed in and his watchful eye exercised, because, while he is under an obligation to respect the child's freedom, he also has an obligation to shield him from all of the various dangers that surround him. Gradually and as the child, better informed with each passing day, becomes more alive to the precise implications of his actions, such guardianship should be relaxed so that the child acquires the habit of clearing away the dangers he meets along the way.

If he is always kept under guard, if he is not allowed to budge without securing leave to do so, out of fear of stumbling, dangers, obstacles-which is to say out of fear of the mistakes he may make, the influences to which he will be exposed and the consequences his conduct might have for himself and for others-he remains forever trapped in the bear-hug of constraint, like the infant in his mother's arms, and will never learn to navigate life's shoals; even as an adult he will still be the little personality-less and limp creature he was as a child.

And on the day that he comes of age and is left to his own devices due to the death or departure of those who had taken on the task of thinking for him and deciding for him, he will have to think, decide and act for himself and will find that he has no inner reason to guide him, no heart to drive him, no will to move him, no conscience to reassure him...

The greatest moralizing force is example. Evil is contagious; so is Good. Example exercises a well-nigh omnipotent influence over the child by reason of his malleability.

If you do not want your children to lie to you, never deceive them; if you don't want them to fight with one another, never strike them; if you don't want them to use coarse language, never curse at them.

If you want them to trust you, prove that you trust them. If you want them to listen to you, speak to them as if they were capable of understanding you; if you want them to love you, do not be stingy with your affection for them; if you want them to cuddle and be open with you, do not be sparing in your kissing and cuddling of them.

Example is all powerful...

All who are not blinkered by partisanship are gradually coming around to the idea that there is a lot less danger in having boys and girls live and grow side by side than in systematically keeping them separated from each other. Simple observation shows that unwholesome curiosity and dangerous precociousness grow out of the systematic separation of these children at an age when they are beginning to sense the earliest stirrings of sexual life.

Can we so delude ourselves as to believe that, for boys and girls to be kept apart, we need only forbid the former to speak to the latter and the latter to play with the former?

Experience shows that the result of such bans is the very opposite of what was expected.

As long as children are young enough not to be troubled by the approach of the opposite sex, it cannot be other than dangerous

and immoral to forewarn them of misdemeanours they are not even tempted to commit.

And once boys and girls reach an age where they feel vaguely moved by an exchanged glance, a fleeting contact, a furtive touch, a held hand, a word, then even if one throws up the highest barriers between them, one will only succeed in fuelling the emotion, and fanning the desire to repeat the encounter. ..

The practice of co-education poses the delicate matter of sex education.

Delicate? Why should it be any more delicate than any other? Why should apprising the child which has reached the age and degree of awareness where this matter comes into play, of the conditions in which the perpetuation of the human race takes place, be any more delicate than informing it about the reproductive practices of other species?

The unease which a conversation or a course on this matter causes the educator derives almost entirely from the mystery with which the master senses the matter is shrouded as far as the child is concerned; and that mystery itself derives from the circumlocutions, reservations, oratorical euphemisms and innuendo with which the topic is customarily treated in the presence of children. If it were dealt with candidly, tackled head-on and studied just like any other element of the natural sciences, all of the awkwardness and embarrassment would evaporate.

The hypocritical fathers of the official morality who preach virtue and who generally practice vice as long as nobody gets to know about it, ask that children be kept in ignorance of certain subjects.

Ignorance is always an evil, a danger.

How many of the misdemeanours and foolish acts committed by children can be ascribed entirely to lack of experience, to ignorance! A far-sighted mother and father should always enlighten their children. The child will find out eventually: so why hide things from him? Could it be to spare his blushes? Keeping secrets encour-