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Moral Education

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

Undated

[Undated fragment from Ms. 2971, Ville de Besançon]

I always see the fathers of families, sufficiently enlightened regarding the value of religious fables, worry nonetheless about the Education to give their children, and ask on what the moral principles that they will be taught will rest.

Morals and superstition have been so thoroughly mixed together that the majority of men do not manage to separate them, and, for them, to destroy the latter it is always a matter of compromising the former.

I am an honest man, says a father, and I know where I stand on the question of the cults. I do not need religion to lead me as a man of honor. But my children must be educated, and I know what that costs. It disgusts me to preach superstition to them. We must speak to them of morals, but on what basis?...

Voltaire was of that opinion: he dismissed his servants and closed the door when his friends debated religion.

That difficulty, however childish it is when we examine it up close, is serious, and I know a lot of people whom it torments and troubles.—I have been myself, like everyone, brought up short by it.

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We absolutely desire an external *sanction* for the law, a mark of dignity, something that astonishes, that conquers wills and prostrates consciences.

However, it is not in this way that things occur. The capital error here, which comes from a lack of observation, is that we have not studied the march of human conscience in its ascent towards moral law.

We have not seen that the moral law only penetrates the soul slowly, that it requires that long education and a sustained practice in order for it to be saturated and impregnated with it.

There are the final reasons for the long childhood of man.

There also is found the motive of the law regarding minority and majority; the age of discernment and irresponsibility.

The jurists, without looking at it in any other way, without giving reasons, will fix the age of reason at 13, 14, 16, or 18 years of age; etc. What can all those say? Nothing.

The basis of moral education is industrial education.

The one who does not learn to work, who does not work, will never be moral: noble or thief, rich or poor, in society, their manners are without basis, their faith without guarantee.

Now, the moral law is a second nature in man, which is introduced by the attraction of the justice that all men demand, and of the idea according to which each aspire.

I say to my little girl: That thing is ugly, and she abstains from it. The same sentiment of self-esteem, which makes her hate worn, dirty clothing, makes odious to her certain words that we have told her were ugly, or not very pretty, and that she understands can in fact hardly be so.

Her mistakes, her little grimaces, everything that is objectionable in her, and that one would suppress right away, rise first to her mind, then gradually make the good, just and honest descend into her heart...

There is no other education to follow, no other sanction than that embrace of Conscience.

To form a man, a woman, from the moral point of view, is a long work, for every day, which demands diligent care and an energetic will.

What resistance can a young girl make who suspects the stories of the catechism of lies, her confessor of a lack of virtue, hell of being a fable, who doubts that all the women are like her, inclined to voluptuousness, who tells herself that things as they are are unjust, that virtue is trickery, etc.?...

But if little by little, instead of crumbling principles, we inculcate her with the true truth, namely, that dignity is a beautiful and precious thing, that to give oneself to a lover, without guarantee, is to enslave herself, to soil herself;—that love is a holy thing, that it is necessary to guard her heart, rather than spread her love on an unworthy object; that the liberty of life depends on it; etc., etc. Oh! Then the resistance will be vigorous.

Everything is in this word *prostitution!*... for the woman.

For the man, everything is in this word: *coward*. There is not a crime, nor misdemeanor, nor theft, nor selfish act, that does not come among men through *cowardice!* Stupidity is itself only a form of it.

Yes, it is on self-esteem, on the exalted sentiment of individual beauty and dignity, not on utility, that morals must be founded; as for religious ideas, the facts prove their powerlessness more than abundantly.

Also the priests have axioms of despair: main are called, but few are chosen. Of 100 men, Mr. P.... tells me, I have hardly found 5 who are honest. We accuse human perversity, selfishness, etc., etc.

I believe it well. The naïve, misled man, placed in a setting of hypocrisy, rebels: it is the last act of his virtue. From this point of view, it is a mass of crimes, remanded to the Cours d'Assises, that are the acts of courage and virtue.