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What's Wrong with the School?

G. K. CHESTERTON

Dale Ahlquist has written an insightful introduction to G.K. Chesterton's ideas on education for this issue of Humanum. Please click [here](#) to access it.

Education: Or The Mistake About The Child

From Chapter 5 - An Evil Cry

The fashionable fallacy is that by education we can give people something that we have not got. To hear people talk one would think it was some sort of magic chemistry, by which, out of a laborious hotchpotch of hygienic meals, baths, breathing exercises, fresh air and freehand drawing, we can produce something splendid by accident; we can create what we cannot conceive. These pages have, of course, no other general purpose than to point out that we cannot create anything good until we have conceived it. It is odd that these people, who in the matter of heredity are so sullenly attached to law, in the matter of environment seem almost to believe in miracle. They insist that nothing but what was in the bodies of the parents can go to make the bodies of the children. But they seem somehow to think that things can get into the heads of the children which were not in the heads of the parents, or, indeed, anywhere else.

There has arisen in this connection a foolish and wicked cry typical of the confusion. I mean the cry, "Save the children." It is, of course, part of that modern morbidity that insists on treating the State (which is the home of man) as a sort of desperate expedient in time of panic. This terrified opportunism is also the origin of the Socialist and other schemes. Just as they would collect and share all the food as men do in a famine, so they would divide the children from their fathers, as men do in a shipwreck. That a human community might conceivably not be in a condition of famine or shipwreck never seems to cross their minds. This cry of "Save the children" has in it the hateful implication that it is impossible to save the fathers; in other words, that many millions of grown-up, sane, responsible and self-supporting Europeans are to be treated as dirt or debris and swept away out of the discussion; called dipsomaniacs because they drink in public houses instead of private houses; called unemployables because nobody knows how to get them work; called dullards if they still adhere to conventions, and called loafers if they still love liberty. Now I am concerned, first and last, to maintain that unless you can save the fathers, you cannot save the children; that at present we cannot save others, for we cannot save ourselves. We cannot teach citizenship if we are not citizens; we cannot free others if we have forgotten the appetite of freedom. Education is only truth in a state of transmission; and how can we pass on truth if it has never come into our hand? Thus we find that education is of all the cases the clearest for our general purpose. It is vain to save children; for they cannot remain children. By hypothesis we are teaching them to be men; and how can it be so simple to teach an ideal manhood to others if it is so vain and hopeless to find one for ourselves?

I know that certain crazy pedants have attempted to counter this difficulty by maintaining that

education is not instruction at all, does not teach by authority at all. They present the process as coming, not from the outside, from the teacher, but entirely from inside the boy. Education, they say, is the Latin for leading out or drawing out the dormant faculties of each person. Somewhere far down in the dim boyish soul is a primordial yearning to learn Greek accents or to wear clean collars; and the schoolmaster only gently and tenderly liberates this imprisoned purpose. Sealed up in the newborn babe are the intrinsic secrets of how to eat asparagus and what was the date of Bannockburn. [A village in Central Scotland where Robert the Bruce led the Scots in the defeat of the English—in 1314.] The educator only draws out the child's own unapparent love of long division; only leads out the child's slightly veiled preference for milk pudding to tarts. I am not sure that I believe in the derivation; I have heard the disgraceful suggestion that "educator," if applied to a Roman schoolmaster, did not mean leading our young functions into freedom; but only meant taking out little boys for a walk. But I am much more certain that I do not agree with the doctrine; I think it would be about as sane to say that the baby's milk comes from the baby as to say that the baby's educational merits do. There is, indeed, in each living creature a collection of forces and functions; but education means producing these in particular shapes and training them to particular purposes, or it means nothing at all. Speaking is the most practical instance of the whole situation. You may indeed "draw out" squeals and grunts from the child by simply poking him and pulling him about, a pleasant but cruel pastime to which many psychologists are addicted. But you will wait and watch very patiently indeed before you draw the English language out of him. That you have got to put into him; and there is an end of the matter.

From Chapter 6 - Authority the Unavoidable

But the important point here is only that you cannot anyhow get rid of authority in education; it is not so much (as poor Conservatives say) that parental authority ought to be preserved, as that it cannot be destroyed. Mr. Bernard Shaw once said that he hated the idea of forming a child's mind. In that case Mr. Bernard Shaw had better hang himself, for he hates something inseparable from human life. I only mentioned *educere* ["to lead out"] and the drawing out of the faculties in order to point out that even this mental trick does not avoid the inevitable idea of parental or scholastic authority. The educator drawing out is just as arbitrary and coercive as the instructor pouring in; for he draws out what he chooses. He decides what in the child shall be developed and what shall not be developed. He does not (I suppose) draw out the neglected faculty of forgery. He does not (so far at least) lead out, with timid steps, a shy talent for torture. The only result of all this pompous and precise distinction between the educator and the instructor is that the instructor pokes where he likes and the educator pulls where he likes. Exactly the same intellectual violence is done to the creature who is poked and pulled. Now we must all accept the responsibility of this intellectual violence. Education is violent; because it is creative. It is creative because it is human. It is as reckless as playing on the fiddle; as dogmatic as drawing a picture; as brutal as building a house. In short, it is what all human action is; it is an interference with life and growth. After that it is a trifling and even a jocular question whether we say of this tremendous tormentor, the artist Man, that he puts things into us like an apothecary, or draws things out of us, like a dentist.

The point is that Man does what he likes. He claims the right to take his mother Nature under his control; he claims the right to make his child the Superman, in his image. Once flinch from this creative authority of man, and the whole courageous raid which we call civilization wavers and falls to pieces. Now most modern freedom is at root fear. It is not so much that we are too bold to endure rules; it is rather that we are too timid to endure responsibilities. And Mr. Shaw and such people are especially shrinking from that awful and ancestral responsibility to which our fathers committed us when they took the wild step of becoming men. I mean the responsibility of affirming the truth of our human tradition and handing it on with a voice of authority, an unshaken voice. That is the one eternal

education; to be sure enough that something is true that you dare to tell it to a child. From this high audacious duty the moderns are fleeing on every side; and the only excuse for them is, (of course,) that their modern philosophies are so half-baked and hypothetical that they cannot convince themselves enough to convince even a newborn babe. This, of course, is connected with the decay of democracy; and is somewhat of a separate subject. The trouble in too many of our modern schools is that the State, being controlled so specially by the few, allows cranks and experiments to go straight to the schoolroom when they have never passed through the Parliament, the public house, the private house, the church, or the marketplace. Obviously, it ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people; the assured and experienced truths that are put first to the baby. But in a school to-day the baby has to submit to a system that is younger than himself. The flopping infant of four actually has more experience, and has weathered the world longer, than the dogma to which he is made to submit. Many a school boasts of having the last ideas in education, when it has not even the first idea; for the first idea is that even innocence, divine as it is, may learn something from experience. But this, as I say, is all due to the mere fact that we are managed by a little oligarchy; my system presupposes that men who govern themselves will govern their children. To-day we all use Popular Education as meaning education of the people. I wish I could use it as meaning education by the people.

From Chapter 7 - The Humility of Mrs. Grundy

The new education is as harsh as the old, whether or not it is as high. The freest fad, as much as the strictest formula, is stiff with authority. It is because the humane father thinks soldiers wrong that they are forbidden; there is no pretense, there can be no pretense, that the boy would think so. The average boy's impression certainly would be simply this: "If your father is a Methodist you must not play with soldiers on Sunday. If your father is a Socialist you must not play with them even on week days." All educationists are utterly dogmatic and authoritarian. You cannot have free education; for if you left a child free you would not educate him at all. Is there, then, no distinction or difference between the most hide-bound conventionalists and the most brilliant and bizarre innovators? Is there no difference between the heaviest heavy father and the most reckless and speculative maiden aunt? Yes; there is. The difference is that the heavy father, in his heavy way, is a democrat. He does not urge a thing merely because to his fancy it should be done; but, because (in his own admirable republican formula) "Everybody does it." The conventional authority does claim some popular mandate; the unconventional authority does not.

But there is a further complication. The more anarchic modern may again attempt to escape the dilemma by saying that education should only be an enlargement of the mind, an opening of all the organs of receptivity. Light (he says) should be brought into darkness; blinded and thwarted existences in all our ugly corners should merely be permitted to perceive and expand; in short, enlightenment should be shed over darkest London. Now here is just the trouble; that, in so far as this is involved, there is no darkest London. London is not dark at all; not even at night. We have said that if education is a solid substance, then there is none of it. We may now say that if education is an abstract expansion there is no lack of it. There is far too much of it. In fact, there is nothing else.

There are no uneducated people. Everybody in England is educated; only most people are educated wrong.

From Chapter 13 - The Outlawed Parent

There is one thing at least of which there is never so much as a whisper inside the popular schools; and that is the opinion of the people. The only persons who seem to have nothing to do with the education of the children are the parents. . .

The Completeness of A Catholic Education (1930)

The fundamental concept of Catholic Education is part of our demand for a complete culture, based on its own philosophy and religion. Our modern and scientific friends are never tired of telling us that education must be treated as a whole; that all parts of the mind affect each other; that nothing is too trivial to be significant and even symbolic; that all thoughts can be coloured by conscious or unconscious emotions, that knowledge can never be in watertight compartments, that what may seem a senseless detail may be the symbol of a deep desire; that nothing is negative, nothing is naked, nothing stands separate and alone.

They use these arguments for all sorts of purposes, some of them sensible enough, some of them almost insanely silly; but this is, broadly speaking, how they argue. And the one thing they do not know is that they are arguing in favour of Catholic education, and especially in favour of Catholic atmosphere in Catholic schools. Perhaps if they did know they would leave off.

As a matter of fact, those who refuse to understand that Catholic children must have an entirely Catholic school are back in the bad old days, as they would express it, when nobody wanted education but only instruction. They are relics of the dead time when it was thought enough to drill pupils in two or three dull and detached lessons that were supposed to be quite mechanical. They regarded letters and figures as dead things, quite separate from each other and from a general view of life. They thought a calculating boy could be made like a calculating machine.

When somebody said to them, therefore, "These things must be taught in a spiritual atmosphere," they thought it was nonsense; they had a vague idea that it meant that a child could only do a simple addition sum when surrounded with the smell of incense. But they thought simple addition much more simple than it is. When the Catholic controversialist said to them, "Even the alphabet can be learnt in a Catholic way," they thought he was a raving bigot, they thought he meant that nobody must ever read anything but a Latin missal.

But he meant what he said, and what he said is thoroughly sound psychology. There is a Catholic view of learning the alphabet; for instance, it prevents you from thinking that the only thing that matters is learning the alphabet; or from despising better people than yourself, if they do not happen to have learnt the alphabet.

The old school of instructors used to say: "What possible sense can there be in mixing up arithmetic with religion?" But arithmetic is mixed up with religion, and with philosophy. It does make a great deal of difference whether the instructor implies that truth is real, or relative, or changeable, or an illusion. The man who said, "Two and two may make five in the fixed stars," was teaching arithmetic in an anti-rational way, and, therefore, in an anti-Catholic way. The Catholic is much more certain about the fixed truths than about the fixed stars.

But I am not now arguing which philosophy is the better; I am only pointing out that every education teaches a philosophy; if not by dogma then by suggestion, by implication, by atmosphere. Every part of that education has a connection with every other part. If it does not all combine to convey some general view of life, it is not education at all. And the modern educationists, the modern psychologists, the modern men of science, all agree in asserting and reasserting this—until they begin to quarrel with Catholics over Catholic schools.

If there is a psychological truth discoverable by human reason, it is this; that Catholics must either go without Catholic teaching or possess and govern Catholic schools. There is a case for refusing to allow

Catholic families to grow up Catholic, by any machinery worth calling education in the existing sense. There is a case for refusing to make any concessions to Catholics at all, and ignoring their idiosyncrasy as if it were an insanity. There is a case for that, because there is and always has been a case for persecution; for the State acting on the principle that certain philosophies are false and dangerous and must be crushed even if they are sincerely held; indeed that they must be crushed, especially if they are sincerely held.

But if Catholics are to teach Catholicism all the time, they cannot merely teach Catholic theology for part of the time. It is our opponents, and not we, who give a really outrageous and superstitious position to dogmatic theology. It is they who suppose that the special "subject" called theology can be put into people by an experiment lasting half an hour; and that this magical inoculation will last them through a week in a world that is soaked through and through with a contrary conception of life.

Theology is only articulate religion; but, strange as it seems to the true Christians who criticise us, it is necessary to have religion as well as theology. And religion, as they are often obliging enough to remind us when this particular problem is not involved, is a thing for every day of the week and not merely for Sunday or Church services.

The truth is that the modern world has committed itself to two totally different and inconsistent conceptions about education. It is always trying to expand the scope of education; and always trying to exclude from it all religion and philosophy. But this is sheer nonsense. You can have an education that teaches atheism because atheism is true, and it can be, from its own point of view, a complete education. But you cannot have an education claiming to teach all truth, and then refuse to discuss whether atheism is true.

Our schools have claimed to develop all sides of human nature; that is, to produce a complete human being. You cannot do this and totally ignore a great living tradition, which teaches that a complete human being must be a Christian or Catholic human being. You must either persecute it out of existence or allow it to make its own education complete.

A convert to the Catholic Church, G.K. Chesterton was a novelist, journalist and essayist. He is one of the great writers of the twentieth century.

