



Arthur Schopenhauer
*Parega and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays**
(1851)

Chapter XXVIII
On Education

§ 372

In consequence of the nature of our intellect, *concepts* should arise through abstraction from *intuitive perceptions*, and hence the latter should exist before the former. If this course is actually taken, as is the case with the man who has for his teacher and book merely his own experience, then he knows quite well what intuitive perceptions there are which belong to, and are represented by, each of his concepts. He knows both exactly, and accordingly deals accurately with everything that happens to him. We can call this way the natural education.

On the other hand, with artificial education, the head is crammed full of concepts by being lectured and taught and through reading, before there is yet any extended acquaintance with the world of intuitive perception. Experience is then supposed subsequently to furnish the intuitive perceptions to all those concepts; but until then, the latter are falsely applied and accordingly people and things are judged from the wrong point of view, seen in the wrong light, and treated in the wrong way. In this manner, education produces distorted and biased minds, which is the reason why in our youth, after much learning and reading, we enter the world partly as simpletons and partly as cranks, and then behave nervously at one moment and rashly at another. For our minds are full of concepts which we now attempt to apply, but almost invariably introduce in an ill-judged and absurd way. This is the consequence of that *ὑστερον πρότερον*¹ whereby we obtain first of all concepts and last of all intuitive perceptions, in direct opposition to the natural course of our mental development. For instead of developing in the child the capacity to discern, judge, and think for himself, teachers are merely concerned to cram his head full of the ready-made ideas of others. A long experience has then to correct all those judgements which have resulted from a false application of concepts. Seldom is this entirely successful; and thus very few scholars have the ordinary common sense that is frequently found among the quite illiterate.

[1 'Confusion of the earlier with the later or of ground with consequent'.]

§ 373

According to what has been said, the chief point in education is that an *acquaintance with the world*, to obtain which can be described as the purpose of all education, may be *started at the right end*. But this depends, as I have shown, mainly on the fact that in each thing *intuitive perception* precedes the *concept*; further that the narrower concept precedes the wider; and that the whole instruction thus takes place in the order in which the concepts of things *presuppose* one another. But as soon as in this sequence something is skipped, there result defective concepts and from these come false ones and finally a distorted view of the world peculiar to the individual, which almost everyone entertains for some time and many all their lives. Whoever applies the test to himself will discover that a correct or clear understanding of many fairly simple things and circumstances dawned on him only at a very mature age and sometimes quite suddenly. Till then there had been here in his acquaintance

with the world an obscure point which had arisen from his skipping the subject in the early period of his education, whether such had been artificial through instructors or merely natural through his own experience.

Accordingly, one should try to examine the really natural sequence of knowledge, so that children may be made acquainted with the things and circumstances of the world methodically and in accordance with that sequence, without getting into their heads absurd ideas which often cannot again be dislodged. Here one would first have to prevent children from using words with which they did not associate any clear concept.*

[* Even children frequently have the fatal tendency to be satisfied with words instead of trying to understand things, and a desire to learn by heart such words in order to get themselves out of a difficulty when the occasion arises. Such tendency afterwards remains when they grow up, and this is why the knowledge of many scholars is mere verbiage.]

But the main point should be always that intuitive perceptions precede concepts, and not vice versa, as is usually and unfortunately the case; as if a child were to come into the world feet first, or a verse be written down rhyme first! Thus while the child's mind is still quite poor in intuitive perceptions, concepts and judgements, or rather prejudices, are impressed on it. He then applies this ready-made apparatus to intuitive perception and experience. Instead of this, the concepts and judgements should have crystallized out from intuitive perception and experience. Such perception is rich and varied and, therefore, cannot compete in brevity and rapidity with the abstract concept which is soon finished and done with everything; and so it will be a long time in correcting such preconceived notions, or perhaps it may never bring this to an end. For whichever of its aspects it shows to be contradictory to those preconceived notions, its declaration is rejected in advance as being one-sided, or is even denied; and people shut their eyes to it so that the preconceived notion may not come to any harm. And so it happens that many a man carries round throughout his life a burden of absurd notions, whims, crotchets, fancies, and prejudices that ultimately become fixed ideas. Indeed, he has never attempted to abstract for himself fundamental concepts from intuitive perception and experience, because he has taken over everything ready-made; and it is just this that makes him and countless others so shallow and insipid. Therefore instead of this, the natural course of forming knowledge should be kept up in childhood. No concept must be introduced except by means of intuitive perception; at any rate it must not be substantiated without this. The child would then obtain few concepts, but they would be well grounded and accurate. He would then learn to measure things by his own standard instead of with someone else's. He would never conceive a thousand caprices and prejudices whose eradication is bound to require the best part of subsequent experience and the school of life; and his mind would once for all be accustomed to the thoroughness and clearness of its own judgement and freedom from prejudice.

Children generally should not become acquainted with life in every respect from the copy before getting to know it from the original. Therefore instead of hastening to place only books in their hands, let us make them gradually acquainted with things and human circumstances. Above all, we should endeavour to introduce them to a clear grasp of real life and to enable them to draw their concepts always directly from the world of reality. They should form such concepts in accordance with reality and not get them from anywhere else, from books, fairy-tales, or the talk of others, and subsequently apply them ready-made to real life. For in that case, their heads will be full of chimeras and to some extent they will falsely interpret reality, or vainly attempt to remodel it in accordance with such chimeras and thus go astray theoretically or even practically. For it is incredible how much harm is done by early

implanted chimeras and by the prejudices arising therefrom. The later education which is given to us by the world and real life must then be used mainly for eradicating such prejudices. Even the answer, given by Antisthenes according to Diogenes Laërtius, rests on this (vi. 7): *ἔρωτηθεὶς τί τῶν μαθημάτων ἀναγκαϊότατον, ἔφη, τὸ κακὰ ἀπομαθεῖν. (Interrogatus quatenam esset disciplina maxime necessaria, Mala, inquit, dediscere.)*²

[² 'When asked what was the most necessary thing to take up, he replied "to unlearn what is bad"'.]

§ 374

Just because early imbibed errors are often deeply engraved and indelible and the power of judgement is the last thing to reach maturity, we should keep children up to the age of sixteen free from all theories and doctrines where there may be great errors. Thus they should be kept from all philosophy, religion, and general views of all kinds and be allowed to pursue only those subjects where either no errors are possible as in mathematics, or none is very dangerous as in languages, natural science, history, and so on. Generally they should at every age study only those branches of knowledge which are accessible and thoroughly intelligible thereto. Childhood and youth are the time for collecting data and making a special and thorough acquaintance with individual and particular things. On the other hand, judgement generally must still remain suspended and ultimate explanations be deferred. As power of judgement presupposes maturity and experience, it should be left alone and care should be taken not to anticipate it by inculcating prejudices, whereby it is for ever paralysed.

On the other hand, since memory is strongest and most tenacious in youth, it should be specially taxed; yet this should be done with the most careful selection and scrupulous fore-thought. For what is well learnt in youth sticks for all time; and so this precious faculty should be used for the greatest possible gain. If we call to mind how deeply engraved in our memory are those whom we knew in the first twelve years of our life and how the events of those years and generally most of what we experienced, heard, and learnt at the time, are also indelibly impressed on the memory, it is a perfectly natural idea to base education on that receptivity and tenacity of the youthful mind by strictly, methodically, and systematically guiding all impressions thereon in accordance with precept and rule. Now since only a few years of youth are allotted to man and the capacity of the memory generally, and even more so that of the individual, is always limited, it is all-important to fill it with what is most essential and vital in any branch of knowledge to the exclusion of everything else. This selection should be made and its results fixed and settled after the most mature deliberation by the most capable minds and masters in every branch of learning. Such a selection would have to be based on a sifting of what is necessary and important for a man to know generally and what is important and necessary for him in any particular profession or branch of knowledge. Again, knowledge of the first kind would have to be classified into graduated courses or encyclopedias, adapted to the degree of general education that is intended for everyone in accordance with his external circumstances. It would begin with a course limited to the barest primary education and end with the comprehensive list of all the subjects taught by the philosophical faculty. Knowledge of the second kind, however, would be left to the selection of the real masters in each branch. The whole would provide a specially-worked-out canon of intellectual education which would naturally need to be revised every ten years. Thus by such arrangements, youth's power of memory would be used to the greatest possible advantage and would furnish excellent material for the power of judgement when this subsequently appeared.

§ 375

Maturity of knowledge, that is, the perfection this can reach in every individual, consists in the fact that a precise connection has been brought about between all his abstract concepts and his intuitively perceiving faculty. Thus each of his concepts rests, directly or indirectly, on a basis of intuitive perception and only through this does such a concept have any real value. Moreover, this *maturity* consists in his being able to bring under the correct and appropriate concept every intuitive perception that happens to him; it is the work of experience alone and consequently of time. For as we often acquire our knowledge of intuitive perception and our abstract knowledge separately, the former in the natural way and the latter through instruction and what others tell us whether good or bad, there is often in our youth little agreement and connection between our concepts that are fixed by mere words and our real knowledge that has been obtained through intuitive perception. Only gradually do the two approach and mutually correct each other; and maturity of knowledge exists only when they have completely grown together. Such maturity is quite independent of the other greater or less perfection of everyone's abilities which rests not on the connection between abstract and intuitive knowledge, but on the intensive degree of both.

§ 376

For the practical man the most necessary study is the attainment of an exact and thorough knowledge of the *real ways of the world*. But it is also the most wearisome, since it continues until he is very old without his coming to the end of his study; whereas in the sciences he masters the most important facts when he is still young. In that knowledge the boy and the youth have to learn as novices the first and most difficult lessons; but even the mature man often has to make up for many lessons. This difficulty in itself is serious, but it is doubled *by novels* which describe a state of affairs and a course of human actions, such as, in fact, do not occur in real life. These are now accepted with the credulity of youth and are assimilated in the mind, whereby the place of mere negative ignorance is now taken by a whole tissue of false assumptions, as positive error, which afterwards confuses even the school of experience itself and causes the teachings thereof to appear in a false light. If previously the youth groped about in the dark, he is now misled by a will-o'-the-wisp; and even more often is this the case with a girl. Through novels a thoroughly false view of life is foisted on them and expectations have been aroused which can never be fulfilled. In many cases, this has the most pernicious influence on their whole life. In this respect, those who in their youth have had neither the time nor the opportunity to read novels, such as artisans, mechanics, and the like, have a decided advantage. There are a few novels which are exceptions and do not merit the above reproach; in fact they have the opposite effect. For example, we have above all *Gil Bias* and the other works of Le Sage (or rather their Spanish originals); then the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and to some extent the novels of Sir Walter Scott. *Don Quixote* may be regarded as a satirical presentation of that false path itself.

* Scanned from Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume Two, Translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.