

TOO WIDE A MESH.

By E. KITCHING.

WHEN I last had the privilege of speaking at a conference I was asked why I had attempted "to drag in philosophy." "Surely," said the speaker, "Philosophy has nothing to do with education!" It was an illuminating criticism because it indicates how psychology has dominated our educational thought almost to the exclusion of philosophy, and it is well to realise that we are up against two different points of view as regards education, that of the psychologist and that of the philosopher.

The dictionary defines psychology as "the natural history of the mind"; philosophy, "the calm state of mind of the wise man." The psychologist is a scientist first of all, the philosopher an artist; the one a seeker, the other a finder. It is not that the scientist never finds; he does, but he goes on seeking, nor that the philosopher never seeks; he does, but he goes on finding. The one spends his life in his search for facts, the other in living upon his finds of principles. Inaccurate as are all generalisations, this will serve to illustrate the two points of view, for the emphasis laid upon psychology and its search has made us rather blind to philosophy and its finds.

But the science of psychology is in the forefront to-day, and therefore guides for the most part the considerations which come under the head of education. Psychology is, so far, in its infancy. It is still experimental. It has to make its way by mental tests, classifications, averages, and to act in the matters that come up in connection with a child's education upon such information as is already in hand. According to psychology, in considering school education, the chief points to be borne in mind are the qualifications of the teacher and the general equipment of the school as a field for observations. The teacher must not only be well versed in psychology, but she must be a suitable person to continue the researches by observation of her own children so that she may not only add to the general knowledge of the psychology of

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education, but also see that her children get the best that is to be had, in fitting them for the vocational training, as a preparation for which the school is provided.

The psychologist has amassed vast stores of information, he has tested the deficient first (as outstanding abnormal mental characteristics are the easiest to watch and classify), he has tested the efficient, and now he has turned his tests towards children of genius, and Dr. C. Cox tells us, "On the whole ... the palm is presented to ... Goethe, whose intelligence quotient rises to 210." But, as the reviewer of two books on this subject in the *Times Educational Supplement* says, "What remains of the inspiration theory? It still stands unsolved. What the authors have actually shown is that all men of genius are above the average in intelligence. It is not proved that their intelligence *is* their genius."

But psychology is only one of three sciences,¹ or methods of enquiry, which contribute their quota to the unifying work of philosophy. Someone may say, "If we get the knowledge of the parts from the different sciences, what is there left for philosophy to tell us?" The answer is that "the synthesis of the parts is something more than the detailed knowledge of the parts in separation which is gained by the man of science. It is with this ultimate synthesis that

philosophy concerns itself. ... The sciences may be said to furnish philosophy with its matter, but philosophical criticism reacts upon the matter thus furnished and transforms it.”²

Perhaps if psychology would keep her eye upon philosophy at work she would work upon a more sure foundation, knowing that her own ground of enquiry is restricted. Would it be necessary then for her to invent the “unconscious mind,” parcelling out the mind in much the same way that the map of Africa was marked with “unknown” tracts years ago?

Therefore, as Miss Mason tells us, philosophy regards education from a different point of view,—from that of the whole person first of all, and all the powers which he brings with him into the world. These have not to be classified or tested, but to be made use of at once, and in the fullest possible way, and then philosophy gives herself, that is the love of knowledge, as guide, and the state of knowledge as a consequence.

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This introduction seems necessary in order to shew that Miss Mason’s philosophy of education cannot be judged by the systems of enquiry set on foot by psychology. Her work is more akin to that of the great poets and artists who see man and see him whole, who see life and see it whole, and this is what I hope to indicate more fully in the paper to follow, in attempting to show that her Method of education *is* her Philosophy and *vicê versâ*.

I do not think it was just a casual circumstance that led Miss Mason to put as a supplement at the end of her last book the chapter on “TOO WIDE A MESH.” Did she leave it as a last word of caution, or, possibly as the key to difficulties yet to be solved? She says:—

“The wide world dreaming on things to come’ is concentrating on a luminous figure of education which it beholds, dimly, emerging from a cloudy horizon. This gracious presence is to change the world, to give to all men wider possibilities, other thoughts, aims: but, alas, this education (which is to be open to all) promises no more on a nearer view than to make Opportunity universal—that is, in spiritual things, he may take who has the power and he may keep who can.

“The net is cast wide no doubt and brings in a mighty haul, but the meshes are so wide that it will only retain big fishes. Now this is the history of education since the world was and is no new thing. The mediaeval schools of castle or abbey, the Renaissance schools, the very schools of China, have all been conducted upon this plan. Education is for him who wants it and can take it, but is no universal boon like the air we breathe or the sunshine we revel in.”³

We believe that education is to change the world. We believe that the educational net must be cast into all waters. The net is huge and strong; it could hardly cost more, but there is the mesh, and this is the debatable point. The size is partly a question of self-protection, and no doubt the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford would welcome some size of mesh that would help in the present over-crowding difficulties at Oxford! Schools entering the fierce struggle for existence (so forcibly portrayed in a recent novel, *For Sons of Gentlemen*) must get credit with big fish, and so the mesh is made wide enough to

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catch only the biggest fish, and these are labelled, and we all fall into the snare of using them for exhibition purposes.

Perhaps in the first place we are apt to forget that school and education are not synonymous terms. We are beginning to realise that a child’s education should be pre-natal,

but do we make enough of the child's right to home education before he goes to school? The gaunt spectre of poverty, on the one hand, and the Venusberg goddess of ease and pleasure on the other, are alike denying the child his birthright. Only children are being sent to nursery schools, and to kindergarten classes at three years old, partly because many a mother cannot cope with a servantless household *and* a child, but also because a child allowed to grow up without training becomes a tyrant at almost any age and, says his father, "the only hope for him is school discipline." And so we come to think of the school instead of the family as the unit of the nation, and we trust that comradeship, tradition, and teachers, trained or not, will accomplish what the parent has failed to do, and that adult schools will accomplish what the school has failed to do.

Educational authorities are bewildered by the claims thrust upon them, and the mesh of the net allows more and more little fishes to escape. The aid of psychology has been called in, in the hope that classification by tests of some sort may produce a *modus vivendi* and children in elementary schools are being graded into (a), (b), (c), (d), while secondary schools have always had "sinks" and other devices for grading backward boys.

"Years ago," said a shoemaker, "the feet of everyone were expected to fit one of five or six sizes, now shoes are expected to conform to every variety of the human foot." In like manner the so-called "cult of the child" has produced educational theories to fit every variety of temperament, and "the good old system" has its votaries still as a protest against so much theorising. Ideas rush in and no one stops the way. A fair trial for all and God save the sufferers is the order of the day. Indeed an Armageddon seems upon us and we look round for someone to call off the attacking forces and bid them cease while we collect our thoughts and consider where we stand.

I wonder what Memling had in mind when, in "The Light of the World," he painted the three wise men each standing on a distant mountain-top as well as portraying them on their quest winding in procession down the mountain paths to Bethlehem.

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Did he mean to suggest that a distant view cast enchantment over the difficulties and perils of the way, that from the height the star would appear so piercingly bright (as stars do at night on a mountain-top), that the wise men would have no doubt of the reality of their vision? Perhaps in educational matters we need to get away from the immediate discussions, to get alone with our wise men of educational thought that we may catch a glimpse of their vision and so find the difficulties of the way assuming a right proportion instead of filling the landscape.

It is perhaps not strange that Philosophy in her care for education should have sent some of our "Wise Men" to dwell among the mountains of our beautiful Lake District, that by their vision of the truth the toilers in the world of education might be inspired, for we all of us have so much routine work to do that sight is apt to get dimmed.

I do not know of any other district where, in a radius of a few miles, the homes of so many of these wise thinkers can be visited. They have not yet come to their own in England as a rather unique school of educational philosophers, though America and France have done much to celebrate one (Wordsworth), and Germany, another (Coleridge), while another, Miss Charlotte Mason, is yet too modern for her thought to be recognised as a philosophy.

Ruskin's teaching on the unity between material and spiritual progress became a "cult" in the eighties, but so much of his wise and living teaching has passed into current thought that

his present partial eclipse is due rather to this fact than to anything else. But he tells us in that vigorous essay of his on *Modern Education* (Appendix VII. to *The Stones of Venice*) that “the great leading error of modern times is *the mistaking of erudition for education*” (the italics are mine.) Again, he says, “the cry for the education of the lower classes which is heard every day more widely and loudly is a wise and sacred cry provided it be extended into one for the education of *all classes*”; though he limits his vision by adding “with definite respect to the work each man has to do and the substance of which he is made.”

It is presumptuous in a short paper to touch lightly upon the educational philosophies of Wordsworth and of Coleridge and of Miss Mason. My bold hope is that I may be sufficiently provocative to send readers back once more to original sources,

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to Coleridge’s *Method*, to Wordsworth’s Poems and Prefaces. (I would also venture to suggest that most illuminating commentary on *The Prelude* by Professor Legouis, published in 1897, which is considered (by one who knows) nearer to Wordsworth’s own thought than anything that has ever been written.)

Though Coleridge, Wordsworth and Miss Mason each differ widely in many respects, all three worked towards a unity in education by placing it upon a philosophical basis.

In *Parents and Children*, Miss Mason tells us, “that it is only as we recognise our limitations that our work becomes effective” ... in that when “we have an end in view we make our way intelligently towards that end and *a way to an end is method*,” and she bids us listen to Coleridge on the subject of Method. May I suggest that it is interesting and illuminating to look up all Miss Mason’s references to Coleridge in the *Home Education Series*, and in her last volume, and to read them again in Coleridge’s own volume on Method. I gather that, as the book is out of print and difficult to obtain second-hand, it is not much read now (also there is no mention of it under Coleridge’s work in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*), so I have ventured to jot down one or two headings from the synopsis to Coleridge’s *Method* which show what Miss Mason had in mind when she spoke of the Ambleside, or, the P.N.E.U. Method. She liked these terms to be interchangeable, feeling that a “habitation and a name” was due to every contribution to the world’s thought.

“The progression in Ideas which is true Method starts from a rightly chosen initiative.

“The habit of Method results from a certain education.

“Mere arrangement is not Method.

“Method is founded on Relations.

“Method signifies a way of transit.

“Method implies unity with progression.

“Method must be an act of the Mind itself which alone unites or makes many one. An universal Method must be sought in the very centre of Human Intellect.

“Method is never arbitrary.

“Relations of things are the materials of Method.”

In amplifying one clause, Coleridge says: “We see that the EDUCATION of the Intellect, by awakening the *Method* of self-development, was his “(Plato’s)” proposed object, not any

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specific information that can be *conveyed into* it from without. He desired not to assist in storing the passive Mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the Human

Soul were a mere repository, or banqueting-room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite its vegetating and germinating powers to produce new fruits of Thought, new Conceptions, and Imaginations and Ideas. Plato was a Poetic Philosopher, as Shakespeare was a Philosophic Poet. In the Poetry, as well as in the Philosophy, of both, there was a necessary predominance of Ideas; but this did not make them regardless of the actual existences around them. They were not visionaries, nor mystics; but dwelt in 'the sober certainty' of waking knowledge."

Of course it will be objected that it is only by showing what children can do in the Parents' Union School, that people are likely to want to know what Miss Mason's Method is, but I learnt at our Children's Gathering at Canterbury, from watching the children's faces, that it is of little use to use the P.U.S. programmes without knowledge of the Method. The children at Canterbury for the most part showed that they did *dwell* "in the sober certainty of waking knowledge." A few were pursuing knowledge with the self-conscious satisfaction which they had caught from teachers who knew nothing of the humility of Miss Mason's Method.

Miss Mason's Method covers the whole of her thought; it is her philosophy. It is not a practice, a device for bringing an unwilling horse to the water and making him drink, but an atmosphere, a discipline, a life, which concern the infant and the adult as much as the school child.

We have been told that Method implies unity with progression and there has been a good deal written lately about the want of a principle of unity in education. Dr. Mackail, in his able and inspiring *Classical Studies*, tells us, "We have up to the present time never had, at least since the Middle Ages, any system of national education or any thought-out co-ordination of the whole field of human studies ... Our culture, including science as well as letters, has grown up casually ... in a habit (not a fit) of absence of mind."

We all know to our cost this want of unity, the working in water-tight compartments that frustrates all efforts at unity. In talking recently to a schoolmaster, we were discussing the difficulties of a school time table. I asked, "How is it

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done in your school?" and he said, "Oh, the Headmaster draws up a rough time table, and then everyone says it won't work. The 'Maths.' man says that if more time is not given to Mathematics he won't take any responsibility for the boys' examinations, the Classics specialist says that unless he can have at least sixty minutes a week more the work will go to the dogs; the Headmaster gives way here and there, and then the Master who teaches English (there do not seem to be special English Masters in Public Secondary Schools), is found left with a good deal less time than usual, and the English work is cut down to a minimum." I know that in one boys' Public School at least the boys spend a year on one play of Shakespeare's, and one book of essays, which have to be studied intensively as to notes and criticism,—and that this is eventually left for holiday work!

Perhaps it is these and similar problems in the curriculum that have led to the sort of examination results described in the last annual report on a University School Certificate Examination, in which we are told that: "a large number of candidates had not prepared the Gospel prescribed. ... In some schools, candidates had evidently been furnished with dictated analyses of certain poems (especially *Lycidas*); a whole class would send up almost identical answers obviously learned by heart, occasionally even in tabulated form ... Many produced a

stock answer on a more or less closely related topic which was not strictly relevant.”

But a child of six can grasp a problem and summarise it in her own way after having heard a description read in a suitable book:—

“Q. How is it we get day and night?

“A. The morning time begins and the sun begins to rise in the East, and the earth turns towards the sun, and at 12 o’clock or noon it is up in the top of Our Father’s sky, shining down upon the tops of the houses. Night time begins. The sun dreads down to the West and the earth turns away from the sun and geography has finished.”

If once the underlying principles of Miss Mason’s method were accepted in schools it would be every teacher’s business to realise what was needed for a boy’s liberal education and to make some sacrifice if necessary. It might reduce the number of specialists, but it would give encouragement to teachers to keep in touch with a wider range of subjects; taking perhaps [p 536]

lower academic qualifications “for the children’s sake,” in order that each subject may have a due place in their own minds. We may not confuse scholarship and knowledge. A liberal education is the birthright of everyone; those fitted for scholarship will probably attain it in any case, and though scholarships will help them to the necessary means, they, too, may suffer from too early specialisation.

A child’s education is like too many other things to-day, a synthesis (*not transformed*) rather than a unity. Books, foods, manures, suffer in the same way. These manufactured things may act as stimulants, but they are not life-giving. A great writer sees his subject as a unity, and his book becomes a living book; but for one book that has life, fifty pour from the press, put together for various utilitarian reasons. De Quincey thinks we need “not so much a better definition of literature as a sharper distinction between the two functions which it fulfils.” “There is,” he says, “first, the literature of *knowledge*; and, secondly, the literature of *power*. The function of the first is to *teach*; the function of the second is to *move*; the first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the *mere* discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy. ... What do you learn from *Paradise Lost*? Nothing at all. What do you learn from a cookery-book? Something new, something that you did not know before, in every paragraph. But would you, therefore, put the wretched cookery-book on a higher level of estimation than the divine poem? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are still but a million of advancing steps on the same earthly level; what you owe is *power*,—that is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards, a step ascending as upon a Jacob’s ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the earth. *All* the steps of knowledge, from first to last, carry you further on the same plane, but could never raise you one foot above your ancient level of earth: whereas the very *first* step in power is a flight—is an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.” In this connection De Quincey tells us that “for most of the sound criticism on poetry or any subject connected with it that I have ever met with

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I must acknowledge my obligations to many years’ conversation with Mr. Wordsworth.”

It should perhaps be noted here that Miss Mason’s use of the word “knowledge” is that

of Coleridge's—"Knowledge is power." She distinguished between *knowledge* as conveyed in literary form and *information* of the text-book order. De Quincey uses the term "literature" as including any book, not necessarily what we should call classic literature.

It might seem as if we were drifting away from our subject but the question of mesh is not a matter of chance but of policy. In the old days education was for the few, now education is for the many, but, as Miss Mason says, it is still "he may take who has the power, and he may keep who can." The mesh is fixed by scholarships, by the Common Entrance and other examinations; it catches only the big fish and, for this, these fish take so much fattening that the rest escape because the mesh is wide and the teacher is not super-human.

In the matter of knowledge, we also pray "Give us this day our daily bread," but like the Israelites we insist on our children gathering more than enough *academic* "manna" for the day, and are surprised when it gets stale. We think that if a child is to take one examination, he may as well do something to help him with the next because there is the scholarship at the Public School, or the University later, to consider, and "the sooner he specialises in the important subjects the better." And so boys of thirteen and fourteen in many schools have done as much Latin, Greek and Mathematics, with a view to scholarships, as they will need at sixteen. It is not that they cannot do these things, but they miss a considerable part of the "liberal education" due to them by so doing.

But in these days boys are happy at school and schoolmasters are for the most part on terms of happiest comradeship with their boys. They love them as human beings and are apt to look askance at any kind of educational theory which treats them as "cases." Miss Mason's Philosophy will leave the masters their boys as human beings, adding perhaps some knowledge of powers of mind which have hitherto been little suspected in the average boy; and growth, not achievement, will be the evidence of things not seen at first sight.

But there are welcome signs that the mesh is narrowing. There are Public Schools which prefer to take boys whose

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outlook will widen the interests of the school rather than merely maintain the scholarship standard. Dr. Norwood, in a recent interview published in *The Guardian*, spoke of the desirability of a wide general education till the age of sixteen. Some school authorities are seriously considering whether it is really necessary for boys and girls to do more than take one qualifying examination. Examining bodies are now inviting reports on the term's work to be considered with the Examiner's reports, and are increasing the number of subjects that may be offered at a rather lower standard. In fact there are many hopeful signs that an examination candidate is to be considered more as an "all round" *person* than as a *case* of mental acquirements in one or two subjects.

But it has been said, shall we not lower the standard of knowledge by decreasing the size of the mesh and by refusing to let the work of a class be done by the few clever boys in it? "No," says Miss Mason, "Education should be a universal boon like the air we breathe or the sunshine we revel in." Then each child will work at his own pace, the clever boy will still be clever, but the backward child will be less backward. The clever ones will still be the first hauled in, but the little fish will not escape. But the class must work all together, even in four divisions, if necessary, but in a natural division of seats—no grading by mental tests. It has been shown that children graded (b) tend to become (c) and even (d), but that in an ungraded form the

children who might be classed (c) and (d) tend to become (b) and (c).

Education is not scholarship, and is not to be tested entirely by mental acquirements; though scholarship may be the test for scholarships. Miss Mason has said, "Education is a life, that life is sustained on ideas, and God has made us so that we get them chiefly as we convey them to one another." On the subject of ideas she refers us again and again to the passages in Coleridge's *Method* on the rise and progress of an idea.

It is strange that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge have any place in the standard books about great educators used in the training of teachers (except in Miss Mason's books). Though *The Prelude* is read by many, it is treated as a wonderful piece of autobiography rather than the definite philosophy of a mind. Perhaps it is because we have not fully realised that, as Coleridge tells us, "To philosophy properly belongs the education of the mind;" and, as Wordsworth says, "Every great poet is a

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teacher: I wish either to be considered as a teacher, or as nothing:" and perhaps because, except for *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is not as much read in England as he should be. One day it will be realised that some of his most inspiring thought is also in his shorter poems and in his Prefaces, and that we can get into closer touch with his thought by using an edition of his work, such as that edited by Thomas Hutchinson, in which Wordsworth's own arrangement is adhered to. It is illuminating to read at one sitting the thirty pages of the *Poems on Independence and Liberty*, and so get a philosophical treatise on the history of England from 1802-1816. Wordsworth has suffered more than most from selections and re-arrangement, but these poems, for instance, read as a historical sequence, show us how he tried to lead people back to clear thinking after another great war. Again, Wordsworth, shows us in a later sequence, *Poems of Liberty and Order*, what should be the qualities of true statesmanship, and therein is counsel for all parents and teachers, who are also statesmen, each in his own domain.

Again, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth writes: "The human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants, and he must have a very faint perception of its dignity and beauty who does not know this and who does not further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability ... A multitude of causes ... are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor."

And we are not much further on to-day, if any, in the matter of recognising the needs of mind, for a writer in *The Spectator* for August 28th, 1926, writes, "I suggest that some historian of the future labelling the various ages by convenient adjectives such as Stone and Iron, may well describe the present era by the ugly epithet of the Age of Internal Stasis. Methods of transport have multiplied so amazingly that we are in danger of forgetting the importance of food along the alimentary canal."

The idea of unity is the keynote of the philosophies of Wordsworth and Coleridge and of Miss Mason. In Coleridge's mind it was the unity of knowledge, in Wordsworth's, the unity of life proceeding from the divine possibilities in common

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people and common things, and from his belief in "man's unconquerable mind." Miss Mason perceived all this, and further, that education is a life; and that not only is a liberal education

due to every man, but that each man is a *person*, possessed of the powers to deal with knowledge without preparation either of the matter in hand or of the mind that is to deal with it. She says, "There is no avenue to knowledge but knowledge itself. ... We have to face two difficulties. We" (i.e., most of us still) "do not believe in children as intellectual persons, nor in knowledge as requisite and necessary for the intellectual life." And to the study of the relations between a *person* and knowledge and to the qualities of each and to the behaviour of mind, Miss Mason devoted her life; working out first for herself in every detail what she gave as counsel to others, and completing her theory with practice tested at every point.

I have not touched upon Miss Mason's practical working out of her philosophy. The training of students at the House of Education, and the work of children in the Parents' Union School is well known, and it is, therefore, all the more necessary that we should frequently return to the mountain-top and get a clear vision of Miss Mason's particular philosophy, and see that not only was she one of a rather unique School of Educational Philosophers, but that she was able to put her philosophy to the test of her own narrow mesh and say, "See that you let not even the least of these little ones escape."

Education will then take her rightful place and the work of the teacher will bring him greater happiness and satisfaction, and the life-giving stimulus of a common ideal. He will no longer, as a specialist, be the High Priest of a cult to which he must introduce his scholars, a few willingly, but most of them unwillingly. He will be a fisher of men, all men, and (knowing their powers and their needs) he will have a net that will let none escape.

Thursday morning was devoted to visits to local Public Elementary Schools, kindly arranged by Mr. Household.

¹ (1) Psychology, (2) Epistemology, (3) Metaphysics.

² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

³ *An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education*.