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## SHOULD CHILDREN REASON?[1]

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You have been hearing this morning about the teaching of children of pre-school age. I should like in my turn to take the point of view of a parent with children who are adolescent—a parent who at one time was faced with the problem of teaching her own children.

The first thing that was brought home to me when I started to try to hand on knowledge was the fact that I had accepted a large part of what I had learnt without the slightest idea of its ultimate use, and with a certain amount of doubt as to its truth.

I was attracted in the first instance by the Parents' Union School because I already believed that children had the right to be treated as persons, in the fullest sense of the word, and because I was in sympathy with two passages in the synopsis of education which I should like to quote:

> 'The mind is not a receptacle into which ideas must be dropped, each idea adding to an apperception mass of its like … on the contrary, a child's mind is no mere sac to



> hold ideas, but is rather, if the figure may be allowed, a spiritual organism, with an appetite for all knowledge.'

And further on:

> 'Children should be taught, as they become mature enough to understand such teaching, that the chief responsibility which rests on them as persons is the acceptance or rejection of initial ideas. To help them in this choice we should give them principles of conduct and a wide range of the knowledge fitted for them.'

On my way here, and on the subject of individual thinking, I have met with a good deal of healthy argument, from people of both sexes and three generations. I have been told that individual thinking would slow up the process of education too much, that it is dangerous, as leading to doubt, and finally that all that it is necessary to do with a child is to pepper it with facts and that some of it will stick.

No doubt some of it will, as it stuck in the mind of the Canadian backwoodsman who, feeling that his children should have religious instruction, started by telling them that the Ten Commandments were drawn up by William the Conqueror when he laid down the law of the land. I do not think the peppering method is the means by which real education is accomplished.

I think I can illustrate what I mean by an example out of my own experience. I am old enough to have begun my education under methods that have now gone out of use. I had to stand up as one of a long line with a book balanced on my head and a backboard behind my back, in order that I might be taught good deportment and a series of tables at one and the same time. The tables were recited, first in unison, then separately. I can't remember any other teaching with regard to them. I don't know how this method affected the rest of us. I admit in all fairness that it taught me to spell really well, and that I can remember one or two dates in English History, of which, for some reason or another, the most prominent is Anne, 1702, but I did grow up with a rooted belief that the tables of weights and measures were a magnificent and complicated lie.

But when I started to prepare the first Parent's [sic] Union course for my daughter I found it laid down that every rule in arith-
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metic must first be proved by a concrete example. It wasn't until then that I grasped the beautiful rhythm and inevitable recurring pattern of the multiplication tables, and it is an actual fact that my husband came in one evening and found me staring at a sheet of paper on which, with pencil and ruler, I had just proved conclusively that there are 144 square inches in a square foot—truly and without doubt 144 visible square inches.

This is, of course, absurd. I had used square measure times without number—to measure up floors for linoleum, garden borders for superphosphate, etc., but I find that there are other people who have the same gaps and weaknesses in their early teaching and there are even some who, if you carry the same measure as far as 30¼ square yards one rod, pole or perch, will begin to look vague and a little lost. I think the reason in my case is perfectly simple. I hadn't been expected to think about what I learned, and naturally I had done no more than I was asked to do. The tables had remained in my mind, rather uncertainly, as a series of unrelated facts.

I have chosen this example because this question of allowing a child to reason about simple facts is one that grows to be of great importance in later life. Everyone knows the passionate desire of the child between four and seven to know 'why' and will remember the relatively slow process when the child, instead of being answered, is made to stop and find out 'why' for itself, when that is possible. I am sure that this fact emerges very plainly: the child who has been taught arithmetical truth and the elements of geography by logical demonstration, and who later will have to apply the same methods to other lessons, will be less liable either to doubt or to loose thinking than the child who has accepted a large number of facts with no clear reason as to why they have been accepted. I think that the peppering method of education is wrong from the beginning because it relegates the child's reasoning faculties to the hours outside school life, and may, with a conventional or lazy child, inhibit it altogether.

No one, of course, expects any one person to prove again all the facts that there are in the world. That would not only slow up education, it would make it absolutely impossible, but I do
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think that the child who has been brought up to prove some of the elementary facts on which its learning is based is also going to grow up into the person who will accept facts with confidence because he respects the findings of competent authority, with the thought in reserve that he can prove them when he is able, and if it is necessary for him to do so.

I have chosen to speak on this particular subject because I have reached the point when a parent is brought smartly up against the fact that children are indeed born persons—to the point when her children enter the second of the 'why' periods, the point at which the adolescent begins to query his original teaching and to show what I may fairly call the mind-colour of his generation.

I have always had a homely mental picture for the process of heredity. You know those wide plaits of darning wool containing several different shades? I think that inherited character is like that—made up of different strands, and showing in each generation a new twist of the plait that brings new shades into prominence. Children inherit, not directly from their parents, but from the whole of their families, and in the same way the heredity of thought, which is common to all of us, appears to be discontinuous, and ideas and ideals take on a different pattern with each generation. It is not only that facts and the ideas connected with them travel down the centuries—like the fact of slavery and Plato's original idea that it was wrong, until at last the moment arrives when the idea is once more translated into fact—in that case into the fact of almost universal freedom. Facts and the ideas connected with them not only travel from one generation to the next, but each generation views them from a different angle, and there is a swing of the pendulum, a natural revulsion against the attitude of the last generation.

So that as the reaction to life of the child from four to seven is one perpetual 'why,' the reaction to life of the young adult is one perpetual argument—a persistent and eager questioning of everything under the sun. Nor, however much she may wish to stand aside, can a parent with several children and only one living room ignore this period of growth, or isolate it as a kind of mental measles which will pass in due course—with the pious
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hope that it will leave behind it an immunity to any kind of individual thinking whatever. For my part, I am enjoying it as I have enjoyed every other period of my children's lives, but in these days it does present certain problems.

I am only in a very limited sense a Parent's [sic] Union mother. I taught my children at home for three or four years and my daughter was in a Parent's [sic] Union school till she was thirteen, but as an intensely interested amateur I have always believed that it was necessary for a child's mind to go through certain stages of growth. I would like to illustrate these by three memories.

One of these is a memory of a baby of two, sitting on the grass in front of her doll's house and trying to force a wooden block through the open doorway. I can see her sitting there, ridiculously serious and very deeply interested, and I can see her mother smiling, and holding back my hand as I tried to give the baby the right block, the reason being that she wished her to find the right one for herself.

The second memory is that of a child of eight who broke in on a morning's reading of *Pilgrim's Progress* with an unexpected spate of metaphysical questions. I do not know what a good and well-instructed parent should have done. I admitted, handsomely and at once, that I was unfitted to argue the point, or to answer her, but that there must be an answer to her questions and I would try to find it. I felt then, as I do now, that it is wise to insist that children should be brought up on whole books. For the majority of classical reading contains, besides the subject-matter, a whole body of problems and opinions, and I think that more children bring their minds to bear on these than would be believed.

The third memory is quite a recent one and is of a remark made to me a few weeks ago by a student. 'It is all very well,' she said, 'while you can take counters and prove that

two and two make four. But when it comes to abstract reasoning not only are there no visible counters to lay on the table, but you cannot always apply the algebraic method of determining an unknown quantity by its functions. Your experience simply is not large enough.'

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There, I think, you have the three stages: reasoning about facts by practical demonstration, arguing about ideas, and the final admission that the reason, magnificent tool as it is, is one tool only in the human equipment and must be content to work slowly, and within the limitations imposed by knowledge and experience.

The person who has reached this stage is not left in a condition of doubt. They are left with a clear understanding of their faculties and are well on the road towards a balanced philosophy of life, combining the affections, the reason and the will.

No person whose children are starting out in the world can be blind to the fact that while there is a great deal crying out to be done, yet there is a lessened chance of congenial or regular employment for those who are growing up. I believe that it is the person whose everyday life is controlled by this whole philosophy who has the best chance of living a balanced life under the present condition of affairs.

I feel very strongly on this point—that the child has the right to continue its own education all through life. But it seems to me that something else is happening besides the usual play of ideas between one generation and the next—that our children are going to meet with an abnormal amount of loose thinking and recurrent waves of mass emotion, where, in extreme cases, it is easier not to think but to submit to a kind of mental conscription. I am not arguing that any line of thought is right or wrong according to the numbers involved, or that deep feelings, genuinely held, cannot move a large number of people at the same moment of time, but I have that tolerant order of mind that would like to see nobody forced to accept any opinion against both their reason and their will, and I do not believe that conscription is any substitute for conversion, even if it is quicker. I think that everybody has a right to make their own findings with regard to initial ideas; it does not worry me when my children think along different lines and approach ideas from another angle, but I do not like it when, occasionally, I am presented with something that sounds like the part-worn gramophone record of somebody else's enthusiasm.

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Am I wrong? Is this way of thinking—apparently superficially and at second hand and often for short periods only—the special colour of the next generation? Is this kind of machine-made thinking as bad as I believe it to be? Or is it the way in which they are dealing with the immensely increased amount of reading, hearing, and seeing news and strange facts which is almost forced on the child of to-day? I once had a friend who was a journalist. She used to tell me that she could get up any subject—the example she gave me was architecture—at short notice and in great detail, and forget it all again within a week. Some kind of re-sorting and throwing out again of unnecessary facts must go on, with all of us. But I sometimes think that the trouble may be allowed to go deeper than that, that too much may be imposed from without, and that the child who has not been taught to think, does not think and does not want to think runs a graver risk than ever before of growing up, not into a member of a team, not even a member of a gang, but merely into a tool that cannot choose the hand that shall use it, or the kind of work on which it shall be employed.

Rousseau was wrong when he said that man was born free. He is not born free. He is born bound by his own nature, by circumstance, and by his neighbour's liberties and needs.

In that sense there is less freedom in the world than there has ever been before, but every man still has one right—the right of forming his own relationship with life and of continuing that form of education known as making his own soul.

I am afraid that I have gone a long way from the point at which I started, a plea for individual thought in early education, but I do believe that education is only begun in childhood and carried on throughout the whole of life, and I believe that anything that tends to check this process of self-education must in itself be wrong.

Because to cut education short is not only to lessen one's powers, it is to deny oneself the greatest of life's pleasures. Dickens says somewhere that the saddest part of losing a friend in death is the feeling that you haven't seen the end of an adventure, that you have never learnt all about them that there was to know. In the same way, when the time comes for me to leave
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the common things of life I shall still be sorry that I never knew all that there was to understand, even about the ones that are under my hand, but then equally I could go on being happy for ever in a world where no two blades of grass are alike, and the same flowers never come out together in any consecutive spring.

I should like to add a couple of footnotes. One is that individual thinking should not tend to that kind of individual action that ends in being able to act with and for nobody else. In a world where no one person can any longer learn the whole of even one subject team-work becomes more and more necessary, and is, in my opinion, another of the major pleasures of life: it is good to be able to say 'alone I did it,' but very rarely, even in creative work, is that true.

And the second thing is this. I have been told that the person who thinks for himself is subjected to an unnecessary strain—as though you insisted on lighting your own candle when there was plenty of electric light already. This I believe to be untrue. The reasonable person will shelve the common matters of daily life, by habit as regards conduct, by routine as regards affairs, but the person who has exercised his mind to think will be much more likely to be able to cope with what I have heard described as 'that recurrent crisis known as to-day.' Life has a habit of continually presenting us, particularly if we are women, with new problems. To take a simple domestic illustration, there is a great deal of difference between persons who, when they discover a leaking pipe or a smoking electric light switch, consider their duty done when they have reported the fact and persons who will cope with it and prevent further damage until the expert arrives; and when it is a more difficult affair, not of action but of conduct, what a difference there is between thinking a thing out and worrying it out! Habit is, I think, the top gear for running on the level, but individual thought must be brought into play for climbing a stiff hill or rounding a sharp corner. The person who is able to do his own thinking is equally able to act under orders or on his own initiative. And where, if we are all going to follow a formula, is the next formula to come from?

You will probably suggest that I have spoken in places as
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though all our children would be called on to make great decisions. It is a weakness of our time that we all tend to feel responsible for a great many things that are outside our control, as though to know about the world and its problems made us capable of dealing with them, a piece of corporate vanity which is probably better than indifference; but I am not anxious to see further than the fact that the way every person conducts his own life must be of importance to the whole.

The world may progress by the wisdom of the few, but that progress is maintained by the understanding of the many, so that I have always wished that my children might have understanding 'that they may be called repairers of the breach, restorers of paths to dwell in.'

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[1] [P.N.E.U. Conference Paper.]