

William Godwin, *The Enquirer. Reflections On Education, Manners, And Literature. In A Series Of Essays.* London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797.

## The Enquirer.

### Part I.

#### Essay I.

#### Of Awakening the Mind

The true object of education, like that of every other moral process, is the generation of happiness.

Happiness to the individual in the first place. If individuals were universally happy, the species would be happy.

Man is a social being. In society the interests of individuals are interwisted with each other, and cannot be separated. Men should be taught to assist each other. The first object should be to train a man to be happy; the second to train him to be useful, that is, to be virtuous.

There is a further reason for this. Virtue is essential to individual happiness. There is no transport equal to that of the performance of virtue. All other happiness, which is not connected with self-approbation and sympathy, is unsatisfactory and frigid.

To make a man virtuous we must make him wise. All virtue is a compromise between opposite motives and inducements. The man of genuine virtue, is a man of vigorous comprehension and long views. He who would be imminently useful, must be eminently instructed. He must be endowed with a fugacious judgment and ardent zeal.

The argument in favour of wisdom or a cultivated intellect, like the argument in favour of virtue, when closely considered, shows itself to be twofold. Wisdom is not only directly a means to virtue; it is also directly a means to happiness. The

man of enlightened understanding and persevering ardour, has many sources of enjoyment which the ignorant man cannot reach; and it may at least be suspected that these sources are more exquisite, more solid, more durable and more constantly accessible, than any which the wise man and the ignorant man possess in common.

Thus it appears that there are three leading objects of a just education, happiness, virtue, wisdom, including under the term wisdom both extent of information and energy of pursuit.

When a child is born, one of the earliest purposes of his institution ought to be, to awaken his mind, to breathe a soul into the, as yet, unformed mass.

What may be the precise degree of difference with respect to capacity that children generally bring into the world with them, is a problem that it is perhaps impossible completely to solve.

But, if education cannot do every thing, it can do much. To the attainment of any accomplishment what is principally necessary, is that the accomplishment should be ardently desired. How many instances is it reasonable to suppose there are, where this ardent desire exists, and the means of attainment are clearly and skilfully pointed out, where yet the accomplishment remains finally unattained? Give but sufficient motive, and you have given every thing. Whether the object be to shoot at a mark, or to master a science, this observation is equally applicable.

The means of exciting desire are obvious. Has the proposed object desirably qualities? Exhibit them. Delineate them with perspicuity, and delineate them with ardour. Show your object from time to time under every point of view which is calculated to demonstrate its loveliness. Criticise, commend, exemplify.

Nothing is more common than for a master to fail in infusing the passions into his pupil that he purposes to infuse; but who is there that refuses to confess, that the failure is to be ascribed to the indolence or unskillfulness of the master, to the impossibility of success?

The more inexperienced and immature is the mind of the infant, the greater is its pliability. It is not to be told how early, habits, pernicious or otherwise, are acquired. Children bring some qualities, favourable or adverse to cultivation, into the world with them. But they speedily acquire other qualities in addition to these, and which are probably of more moment than they. Thus a diseased state of body, and still more an improper treatment, the rendering the child, in any considerable degree, either the tyrant or the slave of those around him, may in the first twelve months implant seeds of an ill temper, which in some instances may accompany him through life.

Reasoning from the principles already delivered, it would be a gross mistake to suppose, that the sole object to be attended in the first part of education, is to provide for the present ease and happiness of the individual. An awakened mind is one of the most important purposes of education, and it is a purpose that cannot too soon enter into the views of the preceptor.

It seems probable that early instruction is a thing, in itself considered, of very inferior value. Many of those things which we learn in our youth, it is necessary, if we would well understand, that we should learn over again in our riper years. Many things that, in the dark and inapprehensive period of youth, are attained with infinite labour, may, by a ripe and judicious understanding, be acquired with an effort inexpressibly inferior. He who should affirm, that the true object of juvenile education was to teach no one thing in particular, but to provide against the age of five and twenty a mind well regulated, active, and prepared to learn, would certainly not obtrude upon us the absurdness of paradoxes.

The purpose therefore of early instruction is not absolute. It is of less importance, generally speaking, that a child should acquire this or that species of knowledge, than that, through the medium of instruction, he should acquire habits of intellectual activity. It is not so much for the direct consideration of what he learns, that his mind must not be suffered to lie idle. The preceptor in this respect is like the in closer of uncultivated land; his first crops are not valued for their intrinsic excellence; they are sown that the land may be brought to order. The springs of the mind, like the joints of the body, are apt to grow stiff for want of employment. They must be exercised in various directions and with unabating perseverance. In a word, the first lesson of a judicious education is, Learn to think, to discriminate, to remember and to enquire.