

THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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U.S. Commissioner of Education

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In memory of John Taylor Gatto, author and schoolteacher.
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A course of five lectures on the Philosophy of Education was given to those members of the University who are engaged in teaching or who expect to become teachers, by William T. Harris, LL. D., Commissioner of Education, January 7-14, 1893. An abstract of the principal topics discussed is here given.

The following list of books is suggested as useful for reference in connection with the course:

1. Rosenkranz: Paedagogik als System (English Translation, D. Appleton & Co., New York). Third part, treating of the substantial contents of the national education Its sacred books, and the idea that the nation stands for in the history of the world. (Lecture 1.)

2. Karl Schmidt: Geschichte der Paedagogik; gives a much fuller statement of the details of the culture systems of the several nations. (Lecture 1.)

3. R. H. Quick; Educational Reformers. (Lectures 2, 3, 4, and 5.)

4. Pestalozzi: Lienhard und Gertrud. (English Translation, Boston.) (Lecture 3.)

6. Herbart; Lehrbuch zur Psychologie. (English translation, New York). (Lecture 3.)

6. Rousseau: Emile. (Lecture 4.)

7. Herbert Spencer; Essay on Education. (Lecture 5.)

LECTURE I. *January 7th*, 1893

THE LITERATURE OF EDUCATION

The first and most important of all educational literature is that showing the ideals of a people the literature on which they are brought up generally the sacred books which reveal what the people regard as divine; consequently what is the highest ideal to be realized. China, for example, has Confucius and Mencius, showing the family as the type of the social whole. These writings furnish the contents of the mind of the Chinese minute observances of etiquette; how to behave towards one's elders and superiors in rank; towards one's inferiors or juniors; towards one's equals. Chinese schools are almost exclusively devoted to filling the memory of the pupil with the ethical maxims of these sacred books, so that the mind shall be full of family etiquette. The aim of Chinese education was to teach the young how to behave; that of the Persians, how to ride, shoot, and speak the truth a faculty not much thought of by the Hindus. The Persian differs from the Buddhist in that the latter wishes to get rid of the world, while the former attempts to conquer the real. The Phoenicians, again, furnish a contrast to Chinese education. Their object was to wean the child from the family; whereas the Chinese endeavor to educate the young so that they will become submerged in the family. The Phoenicians aimed to create a love of adventure. Their children were educated in myths. The stories in Homer's "Odyssey" must have been derived from the tales of the Phoenician sailors, which were calculated to engender a hunger and thirst for adventure, so that the young Phoenician would gladly get on board

ship and go to the ends of the world in the interests of trade. The Greeks were imbued with the new world-principle of a spiritual and beautiful individuality. They thought more of the games which they practised in the evenings on the village green than of the tasks by which they earned their bread. They learned history and geography from the second book of Homer's "Iliad." They thought not of commercial education, like the Phoenicians, but of that heroic individual who furnished a beautiful ideal.

Later on, Greek education became more scientific and more reflective. The Roman concentrated his whole mind on the will. He went beyond the circle of his city, and studied to cause even foreigners to live under the same laws with himself. Freedom meant more to him than to any of the Asiatic nations. It meant the power of the individual to hold, alienate, and devise property. This was an enormous step upward in educational progress. Hitherto, property could only be held by the family. Contract is the supreme idea of the Roman. He even carries it into his religion. Thus he prays to one of his deities to help him in some extremity or to give him his desire, and he promises, in turn, to build the god a temple. The Roman wants to conquer all peoples and to make them free under the law. But the greatest educational lesson is derived from the Hebrew people. They teach the personality of the Divine apart from Nature. This Divine Person creates Nature in order that He shall have something to recognize Him. The Divine Being does not efface man simply, but is the embodiment of goodness and righteousness the righteousness that breathes the spirit of loving kindness, holding his creatures responsible only in so far as they know the right, and returning their deeds upon them. Art education ranked first in the Greek mind, for he worshipped the beautiful. Then came science and philosophy. From the Greeks we get these elements of our educational curriculum. From the Romans we get the principle of organization. Whether or not a person is educated reflectingly into civilization, he finds himself in the great network of usages that go to make up civilization.

Education is meant to give one an insight into the genesis of these things, so that he can detect an element of each in the threads of his civilization. Ninety-nine out of a hundred people in every civilized nation are automata, careful to walk in the prescribed paths, careful to follow prescribed custom. This is the result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual under his species. The other educational principle is the emancipation from this subsumption. This is subordinate, and yet, in our time, we lay more stress upon it than the other. Look at the French Revolution. What a prodigious emancipation that was. It was predicted by Rousseau; but those who read him only superficially, without first studying his genesis, will find that their minds are poisoned by his doctrine of the supremacy of nature. Comenius taught the emancipation of the individual from the printed page. Spencer says that the modern school system is all wrong, and has a tendency to get away from science and cause students to waste time over the dead languages.

Emancipation has now become the important side of the educational question. But the student of advanced education must first avail himself of the wisdom of the race, and learn how not to be limited by it. He cannot progress unless he is a free man, for he must not be so much subsumed that he cannot investigate scientifically, and with safety to himself, all problems that present themselves.

LECTURE II. Saturday, *January 14th*, 1893

PROBLEMS PECULIAR TO AMERICAN EDUCATION

There are two kinds of education. The first may be called substantial education the education by means of the memory; the education which gives to the individual methods and habits and the fundamentals of knowledge. It is this education which the child begins to receive from its birth. This sort of education is education by authority that is, the individual accepts the authority of the teacher for the truth of what he is told, and does not question it or seek to obtain insight into the reason for its being so. It is this education by authority the education of the past that the modern or second kind of education seeks to supersede. This second kind may be called individual or scientific education; it is the education of insight as opposed to that of authority. When this kind of education is acquired, it frees the individual from the authority of the other. Under the system of education by authority when told, for instance, that the sum of three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, this will be blindly believed only as long as authority sanctions this belief; but when an insight into the reason for this geometrical truth is obtained, no change of authority is able to make the individual doubt. But there is this danger in the system of education by insight, if begun too early, that the individual tends to become so self-conceited with what he considers knowledge gotten by his own personal thought and research, that he drifts toward empty agnosticism with the casting overboard of all authority. It is, therefore, necessary that this excessive conceit of self which this modern

scientific method of education fosters, be lessened by building on the safe foundations of what has been described as the education of authority. The problems of the reform movement centre, therefore, on the proper method of replacing this authoritative or passive method of education by education through self-activity.

There is another problem that of the method of study. Germany advises us to teach by oral methods, by giving pieces of information and insight orally by word of mouth. But the American educators have blundered upon what may be defended as the correct method, namely, the textbook method. It was merely the outcome of an unconscious trend. The method is of course liable to very serious abuse, but the good points greatly outweigh the bad. It has the advantage of making one independent of his teacher; you can take your book wherever you please. You cannot do that with the great lecturer, neither can you question him as you can the book, nor can you select the time for hearing the great teacher talk as you can for reading the book. And it is true that nearly all the great teachers have embodied their ideas in books. The greatest danger of text-book education is verbatim, parrot-like recitation; but even then from the poorest text-book a great deal of knowledge can be gleaned. Then there is the alertness which in any large class will necessarily be engendered by an intelligent understanding and criticism of the results arrived at by different pupils in discussing a certain piece of work given in his own words. And then there is the advantage to be found in the fact that with the textbook the child can be busy by itself. Lastly, there is the problem of discipline. There should be very little corporal punishment; the milder forms of restraint should be used. The child that is brought up accustomed to the rod loses his self-respect and may become the man who must have police surveillance.

Silence, punctuality, regularity and industry are fundamental parts of a “substantial education” as much as the critical study of mathematics, literature, science and history is a part of the “education of insight.” These two kinds of

education, that of authority and that of self-activity, should be made complementary.

LECTURE III. *January 21st, 1893*

OPPOSITION BETWEEN PESTALOZZI AND HERBART AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Pestalozzi laid great stress on sense-perception as the foundation of all school education. Herbart lays stress on the elaboration of sense-perception or rather upon the mental reaction against the impressions made on our senses. Thought goes back of the object to understand and explain its origin, how it became to be what it is, what purpose it is to serve. Thought sees objects in the perspective of their history. It studies causes and purposes. Thus thought is not as the disciples of Pestalozzi hold, a continued and elevated sort of sense-perception, but rather a reaction against it. It is a discovery of the subordinate place held by objects in the world; they are seen to be mere steps in a process of manifestation, the manifestation of causal energies. A new perception is received into the mind by adjusting it to our previous knowledge; we explain it in terms of the old; we classify it, identify it; reconcile what is strange and unfamiliar in it with previous experience; we interpret the object and comprehend it ; we translate the unknown into the known. This process of adjusting, explaining, classifying, identifying, reconciling, interpreting and translating, is called *apperception*. We must not only perceive, but we must apperceive; not only see and hear, but digest or assimilate what we hear and see. Herbart's "apperception" is far more important for education than Pestalozzi's "perception." At first the memory was the chief faculty cultivated in education; then Pestalozzi reformed it by making the culture of sense-

perception the chief aim; now with Herbart the chief aim would be apperception or the mental digestion of what is received by perception or memory. Illustrations of the power of apperception to strengthen perception: Cuvier could reconstruct the entire skeleton from a single bone; Agassiz the entire fish from one of its scales; Winckelman the entire statue from a fragment of the face; Lyell could see its history in a pebble; Asa Gray the history of a tree by a glance. Apperception adds to the perceived object its process of becoming. Noiré has illustrated apperception by showing the two series of ideas called up by the perception of a piece of bread. First the regressive series dough, flour, rye; and the processes baking, kneading, grinding, threshing, harvesting, planting, &c. Each one of these has collateral series, as for example, planting has plowing, plow, oxen, yoke, furrow, harrowing, sowing seeds, covering it, etc. The second series is progressive bread suggests its uses and functions; food, eating, digesting, organic tissue, life, nourishing strength, supply of heat, bodily labor, &c. The course of study in schools must be arranged so as to prepare the mind for quick apperception of what is studied. The Pestalozzian makes form, number, and language the elements of all knowledge. He unfortunately omits causal ideas, which are the chief factors of apperception; we build our series on causally. Accidental association satisfies only the simple-minded and empty-headed.

LECTURE IV. *January 25th, 1893*

**ROUSSEAU AND THE RETURN TO NATURE
REVOLUTIONARY PROTEST**

The time of Louis XIV: the nobles attracted to Court and to a life of gayety, neglecting their estates and wasting the fruits of toil in riotous living; the laborers deprived of the advantage of the directive power of the nobility fail in power of production. The French Revolution is the result. Rousseau its prophet; he proclaims a return to nature. "Nature," a word of ambiguous meaning; human nature versus physical nature; human history the revelation of man's nature; it is realized in institutions and not by man as an isolated individual. Nature in time and space is under the dominion of necessity, everything constrained to be what it is by outside forces. Human nature is an ideal, and when realized it has the form of freedom and self-determination, each man a law unto himself and each one engaged in helping every other one, for by this each one helps himself. Rousseau appealed to nature in everything. What we call civilization was to him a mere artificial form. His plea was to be natural, come back to the point where nature leaves you. Rousseau came from Switzerland to France, and at an opportune time for him; for there was a great ferment of ideas at this epoch. He was struggling along in Paris, barely securing a livelihood, when there came the offer from the Academy of Dijon of a prize for an essay on the progress of the arts and sciences, whether it has tended towards the purification of morals and manners. The negative side suggested itself more forcibly to him, as he was better fitted for it by his mode of living

and morals, and by his literary style, and he found himself at once a “censor of civilization.” This essay was soon followed (1752) by one on the origin of the inequality among men. The great tension produced by the artificiality of the civilization of the Court life of the time had caused men to become anxious to get back to a simplicity of living, and Chateaubriand painted the charms of the forest life of the Indians. In this reaction the meaning of civilization is ignored. Man emancipates himself from drudgery and compels nature by the forces of his intellect to feed and clothe him. The “Social Contract” followed (1762) this with an attack on the authority of the State; and in the same year his *Émile* undermined the School and the Church: and so he attacked all the social institutions one after another the family, civil society, the Church and the State. He proposed to sweep all away by summoning them before the bar of his individual judgment and condemning all. In the opening paragraph of his *Émile* he declares that everything which comes from nature is good, while everything degenerates in the hands of man. The antithesis of civilization is savagery, and Voltaire wittily exposed the fallacy of Rousseau’s teaching in his letter accepting the book. He said “never has anyone employed so much genius to make us into beasts. When one reads your book he is seized at once with a desire to go down on all fours.” External authority is a perennial necessity for man in his immaturity. An appeal to nature is always a piece of jugglery with words. In mere nature we have matter and force. Everything inorganic is made by some external influence. But organic nature is the opposite of inorganic. The plant has the power of assimilation, and the animal the further powers of locomotion and feeling, or ability to select or choose its surroundings. In man this is still further increased by recollection and memory, by which the mind makes over its impressions. To do his duty properly he must look to higher things, and in ethical ideas the human becomes transcendental. The moral man acts as though the sole being in the world is humanity. No natural instinct is admitted as having validity against the moral law. If we adopt the doctrines of

material nature and yield to our feelings and impulses, we remain animals. But if we take nature in the sense of our ideal, divine possibility, and realize it by education, we attain to human nature properly so-called, which is not something given us without effort, but only the product of culture.

LECTURE V. *February 4th*, 1893

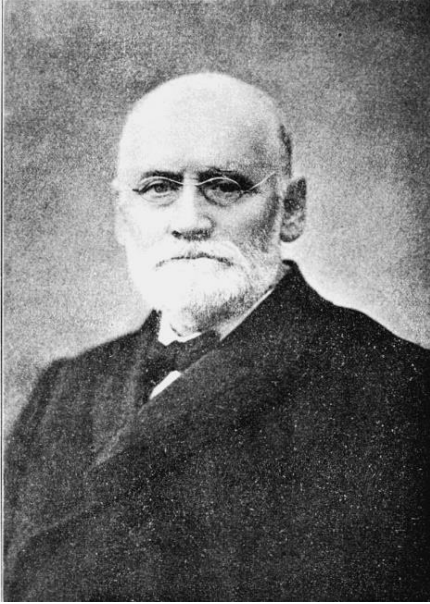
HERBERT SPENCER AND WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS OF MOST WORTH

In Herbert Spencer, the return to nature means the study of natural science, and this becomes the great thing. But natural science is only the instrument with which we conquer nature. Everybody becomes filled with the idea of progress by it, for we see that nature as it is, existing in time and space, is conquered by inventions and made to serve man. There was never a more unscientific book made than Spencer's essay on education; for while he praises science, he does not apply it to a study of education as it is and has been. To do this he ought to study the genesis of the course of study and explain its functions. The unscientific person takes things as they are, and cares not for their origin. To study things from a scientific standpoint means to take an inventory of them to find the process in which they are being produced; to connect them with other things; to see things in their causal process. He does not understand the system of education as it exists, because he does not know the educational value of its branches. The education he proposes for us is for the purpose of complete living; but what is Spencer's definition of this complete living? Spencer does not take education as the genesis of man's spiritual life, but merely as something useful for showing how to care for the body and perform the lower social functions as the tool of life, the instrument by which life is preserved. Now suppose the definition of complete living to be to elevate each individual so that he can take advantage of the life and

experience of his race. Then he would find complete living to involve the initiation into the civilizations of the past that furnish the elements out of which our own civilization is formed. Spencer thinks that the first business of the child is to know physiology; the next is the selection of a vocation or trade, which leads to training for citizenship; and last of all he puts relaxation and amusement, in which he includes literature and art. Now, Aristotle characterized man as the symbol-making animal. Human nature has to be expressed by symbols. The poets of a people first paint the ideal, which makes civilization possible. Literature furnishes the most essential branch of education, so far as its function is to help the child into civilization. Man sits in the theatre of the world (as Plato tells us) and sees the shadows of men and events thrown on the curtain before him. Behind him and out of his sight is the Great Leader, who is making these shadows. From them he draws his ideals, but ideals are potentialities, not realities. Self-activity, the freedom of the soul, is made possible by the institutions of society, the family, civil society, State and Church. We must not confound the mere school with these other great institutions of civilization. In the family are learned the mother tongue, habits, and nurture. Civil society teaches him his vocation; the State, his duties as citizen; and the Church shows him his place in the divine plan of the universe. Spencer calls education the subject which involves all other subjects, and the one in which they should all culminate. But someone has better said that school education is the giving to man the possession of the instrumentalities of intelligence. By his school education he does not attain all education, but he gets the tools of thought by which to master the wisdom of the race. There are, then, three epochs of school education elementary, secondary and higher. The first or elementary stage is the opening of the five windows of the soul. Arithmetic is the foundation of our knowledge of nature, by which we measure and count all things inorganic. When its first principles are mastered the child begins to want to combine the organic with the

inorganic, and then we come to another window, that of elementary geography. The distribution of animal and plant life is learned, and the child begins to peep into the organization of things, the growth of plants, and the formation of the continents and the earth. Thirdly, he learns to read and write, and gets a glimpse into literature. The original colloquial vocabulary learned at home, variously estimated at from 300 or 400 to 3,000 or 4,000 words, deals only with commonplace things. But the school takes this colloquial vocabulary as a key and opens up the great reservoir of literature in books, initiating him into a higher class of words, expressive of fine shades of feeling and thought. Thus, to his own vocabulary are added those of great writers, who have seen nature from a different point of view and presented their thoughts in gems of literary style. Literature lifts up the pupil into the realms of human nature and discloses the motives which govern the actions of men. Yet Spencer puts this last in his course of study. After learning all science has to give, after learning one's trade and the care of his body, he would then, if there is leisure, permit literature and art. But literature is the greatest educator we have. It has made possible newspapers and periodicals and books, with pictures of human life and of the motives governing our actions. The fourth window of the soul is grammar, wherein we have a glimpse of the logical structure of the intellect as revealed in language. The fifth window is history (that of his own country), wherein he sees revealed the aspirations of his countrymen, his own nature, written out in colossal letters; and these five studies should make the elementary education of the student. The secondary education takes up human learning and continues it along the same lines, namely: 1, inorganic nature; 2, organic nature; 3, literature (the heart); 4, grammar and logic (the intellect); and 5, history (the will). Algebra deals with general numbers, while Arithmetic has definite numbers to operate with. Geometry and physics continue inorganic nature, while natural history continues the study already commenced in geography. Then come Greek and Latin, and here is opened up a great field of

study into the embryology of our civilization. In the dead language* we have the three great threads running through the history of human progress. The Greek, with its literature and aesthetic art and its philosophy, showing the higher forms of human freedom in contrast with the Egyptian, which showed only the struggle for freedom and never the man separated from the animal and the inorganic world. The Roman, with the continual gaze upon the will of man, seeks the true forms of contracts and treaties and corporations, whereby one man may combine with another, and it essays the conquering of men and reducing them to obedience to civil law, not only external conquest but internal conquest as well. The Hebrew thread is the religious one, which we recognize in the celebration of worship one day each week and in the various holy days. We acknowledge this the most essential thread of our civilization. So, with the secondary education we begin to get the embryology of our forms of life. The higher or collegiate education is the comparative step of education. Each branch is studied in the light of all the others. Natural science and sociology are investigated; logic and mental philosophy; ethics and rhetoric; as well as the philosophy of history and of literature, and the comparative sciences, which furnish the light for the whole method of higher education. The first, or elementary education, then, is but superficial, a mere inventory ; the secondary insists on some reflection on what has been learned ; and the third, or higher education, is the unity and comparison of all that has been learned, so that each is explained by the whole. Give the child possession of the embryology of civilization, and his insight into the evolution of civilization is insured. Educators have adopted the course of study as it exists, led by an unconscious or blind impulse. Herbert Spencer should have investigated and discovered its purpose, which is a far deeper one than he has thought out when he advocates its overthrow for the sake of knowledge that leads to direct self-preservation.



William Torrey Harris, (born Sept. 10, 1835, North Killingley, Conn., U.S.—died Nov. 5, 1909, Providence, R.I.), U.S. educator, probably the most widely known public school educator and philosopher in the United States during the late 19th century.

Harris attended Yale College and after 1858 worked as a teacher and later as superintendent of schools in St. Louis, Mo. (1868–80). He served as U.S. commissioner of education from 1889 to 1906. As a practical school man, Harris was an effective administrator and reformer. He introduced into the curriculum such studies as art, music, science, and manual arts. He favoured the professional study of education for teachers in training. He worked to extend the public high school and incorporated the kindergarten into the regular school system of St. Louis. In addition to serving as president of the National Education Association in 1875, Harris also presided over the National Association of School Superintendents (1873–80).

As a philosopher and psychologist, Harris was more synthetic than original, embracing German Idealism, American Transcendentalism, Christianity, phrenology, and mental discipline. He lectured for several summers at the Concord School of Philosophy, but Hegelian Idealism was retreating, and Harris was not creative enough to stem the rising tide of Naturalism. A prolific writer of several hundred philosophical and educational articles, Harris was also editor of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1867–93), Appleton's International Education Series, and *Webster's New International Dictionary*.

From the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#).

This work has been edited with care by Elliot Bramham.

If you wish to further explore the philosophical underpinnings of education, *Dumbing Us Down* by John Taylor Gatto will provide you with an insightful critique.