

CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

REFLECTIONS ON THE
OPERATION OF THE
PRESENT SYSTEM OF
EDUCATION, 1853

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PREFATORY NOTE

The increasing importance of the subject treated of has led the author to revise an article, published nearly two years ago in a monthly journal, and to present it in the following pages. His object is to call attention to what he regards a *defect in the operation* of our present system of education, and to propose some suggestions for its remedy. That defect consists in the want of moral instruction in our schools. Its existence, he believes, may be attributed to the state of public opinion, rather than to any imperfection in the system itself. For this reason, he is of opinion that remarks on the subject are more necessary, and therefore worthier of the consideration and indulgence of the public.

*35, Court Street, Boston,
May, 1853.*

The duty of bringing up the young in the way of usefulness has ever been acknowledged as of utmost importance to the well-being and safety of a State. So imperative was this obligation considered by Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, that he excused children from maintaining their parents, when old and feeble, if they had neglected to qualify them for some useful art or profession. Although this principle has universally prevailed in every civilized age, yet the success of its practical operation depends entirely upon what is understood by necessary knowledge and useful employment. If, as among the Lacedemonians and many other nations of antiquity, a useful art consisted chiefly in the exploits of war, – in being able to undergo privations and hardships, and in wielding successfully the heavy instruments of bloodshed, – such an education as would conduce to the acquirement of that art must be estimated on different grounds from that system whose object is to develop the moral and intellectual faculties.

From the distant past, traditions have come down, evincing in many instances exemplary care in the culture of youth; but the conspicuous record made of them by the historian and poet refutes the idea that they were common. With the lapse of centuries, revolutions in the arts and sciences have been effected, important in themselves, but more so for the changes they have produced both in social and political affairs. Like hunters who discover in their forest-wanderings a valuable mine which shapes anew their course of life, the people of the old world, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were allured from their incessant conflicts by the more profitable arts of peace. Till then the interests of learning had been crushed by the superstition and bigotry of the times. In the fourteenth century even, the most celebrated university in Europe, that of Bologna, bestowed its chief honors upon the professorship of astrology. But these grand developments in art and science gave a new impulse to social life. Thenceforward the interests of education began to thrive. The patronage given to popular instruction by many of the rulers of European States has imparted a lustre to their annals, which will almost atone for their heartless perversion of human rights. For whether we consider the coercive system of Prussia, which not yet exhibits very happy practical results; or the Austrian system, which indirectly operates coercively by denying employment to those unprovided with school-diplomas; or the Bavarian, which makes a certificate of six years' schooling necessary to the contracting of a valid marriage or apprenticeship; or, indeed, the systems of many other Continental countries, – we find much to excite cheering anticipations.

This country – this Commonwealth especially – has ever been distinguished for being foremost in the maintenance of a benevolent and comprehensive system of education. That system is, we believe, in the judgment of foreigners, one of the most original things which America has produced. Fortunately for the prosperity of the people who derive their support on this rugged soil, their fathers were a class of men deeply imbued with moral sentiment, – lovers of freedom and of knowledge; men who sought that security of their principles in the spread of moral intelligence, which the sword alone would in vain attempt to procure. "The hands that wielded the axe or guided the canoe in the morning opened the page of history and philosophy in the evening;" and it cannot be a matter of surprise, that, counting their greatest wealth in their own industry and resolution, they should at an early period turn their attention to the important subject of education; and that they even denied themselves many of the comforts of life, in order to secure the blessings which might evolve therefrom.

The peculiarity of our system of government is, that it invests the sovereignty in the people; and, as it has always been the policy of every nation claiming to be civilized to educate those who were designed to govern, it might naturally enough be inferred, that, in this country, means would be provided whereby the whole people might receive an education. And thus it is. The true object, therefore, of such a system of instruction as the government supports, it must be conceded by all, consists in qualifying the young to become good citizens, – in teaching them not only what their duties are, but making them ready and willing to perform them. We should discriminate between the object of common schools and the object of colleges; between an institution intended to inform every one of what every one should know, and one designed to fit persons for particular spheres of life, by a course of instruction which it is impracticable for all to pursue. A very large majority of those who enter our colleges are desirous of acquiring that knowledge, as well as discipline, which will prepare them most thoroughly for some one of the learned professions: it is a course preparatory to one still higher, – a gateway by which the industrious and sagacious may with greater ease traverse the long and winding avenues of science. Of a more general nature is the object of that instruction provided by the State for all, because it is designed to fit them for a greater variety of duties, and the chief of these duties is that of *living justly*. If we regarded physical resources as the chief elements of prosperity, or intellectual superiority the principal source of national greatness; if we followed the theory of the Persian legislator, Zoroaster, who thought that to plant a tree, to cultivate a field, and to have a family, were the great duties of man, we might be content with that instruction which would sharpen the intellect, and furnish us with acute and skilful men of business. But an enlightened public sentiment rejects such a theory as narrow and unsafe. It is surely of great importance that children should be made familiar with the common branches of knowledge; that their minds should receive as thorough discipline as is practicable; but of what transcendent importance is it that they should have impressed upon their minds the principles of truth and justice, and the true value of resolute, earnest industry; that they should grow up in the love of virtue and honor, and be taught to know and govern themselves! Education of the heart, as well as education of the mind, should be promoted. The State should make men before it makes artisans; citizens before it makes statesmen. And this in theory it proposes to do. The highest praise that can be bestowed upon our system of education, here in Massachusetts, is that the leading object it contemplates is the moral instruction of the young. This is its grand and peculiar feature. Those who have been and are now at the head of our educational interests, have sought, by timely word and deed, to carry this purpose into active operation. In so doing, they have attempted to give effect to the law which expressly ordains that "all instructors of youth shall exert their best endeavors to impress on the minds of children and youth committed to their care and instruction, the principles of piety, justice, and a sacred regard to truth, love to their country, humanity and universal benevolence, sobriety, industry and frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and those other virtues which are the ornament of human society, and the basis upon which a republican constitution is founded; and it shall be the duty of such instructors to endeavor to

lead their pupils, as their ages and capacities will admit, into a clear understanding of the tendency of the above-mentioned virtues." (Rev. Stat. chap. 23, § 7.)

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