

**'There cannot be two good teaching methods. There is only one good one and that is the one that rests entirely on the eternal laws of nature.'**

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What is it actually that characterises Pestalozzi's theory of education?

Without a doubt it is the demand he repeated again and again that the work of education must be rooted in human nature.

Pestalozzi's view that human beings have a 'nature' — and an 'eternal, unchanging' one at that — is a source of dispute among philosophers. It can be objected that people are subject to social change and ultimately become what they make of themselves under the prevailing conditions. That can be seen from a simple comparison with animals. For example the life of the honey bee follows exactly the same course in the bee colony as two thousand years ago and it will still do so in two thousand years' time. It is, therefore, sufficient to study a single hive to know what the life of *the* bee is like, that is, what the nature of the bee is. It is quite different with human beings. Not only is the life of each individual different from that of all the others, but people live, and have always lived, in differing social systems, which will continue to change in the future. That appears to substantiate the hypothesis that there is nothing permanent in mankind, everything is changeable depending on the prevailing social conditions; and therefore, the hypothesis continues, basically everything is feasible in education as well.

But Pestalozzi resolutely opposed such a view. He was convinced that, despite the constant mutation of social conditions, there was something unchanging, eternal in human beings, something that remained true through *all* social change. Thus we all, wherever, whenever and however we live, have our physical and psychological needs. We are

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all equipped with physical and mental faculties. We must all come to terms with our own egoism and suffer accordingly from the restrictions of society. And only after we have found and realised our life's task, which is beyond egoism, can we lead a truly fulfilled life (Pestalozzi calls this 'morality', 'becoming moral'.) And we are all endowed with a 'higher nature' as well, which is what makes this life in love and truth possible and allows us to see life as meaningful. Pestalozzi brings all these unchanging, eternal aspects together in the concept of *human nature*.

But it was also Pestalozzi's conviction that human nature is such that individuals cannot realise their true potential as *human beings* without the influence of other people. If people were simply left to themselves as they grew up, they would run wild. Pestalozzi often refers to the entirety of measures by which the forces of education of the time act on the child as *the art of education*, mostly, however, just as 'art'. Thus he says, 'Human beings only become human beings through art.' Since 'art' normally has a quite different meaning, Pestalozzi is often misunderstood.

There are, therefore, two 'forces' confronting each other in the development of every person, on the one hand unchanging human nature in its individual form, on the other *art*, which varies according to the social situation.

That raises the question of which of these two forces should take precedence. For Pestalozzi there is no possible doubt: nature has absolute precedence. In fact that is only logical since, if nature is unchanging but art can vary, art must be guided by nature. Thus Pestalozzi insists that art must *submit* to nature, that education and upbringing in general must be *in accord with nature* if people are to achieve the goal of full humanity.

This insistence rests, among other things, on his conviction that in a way the *ideal*, full humanity, is an undeveloped seed *within each individual's human nature*. This distinguishes Pestalozzi from those who see a person at birth metaphorically as a completely blank sheet of paper and consequently believe one can make anything one wants out of him. According to Pestalozzi, education should not *put things into* a person, but *develop* something within him and *bring it out*, namely full humanity.

The demand that education should be *in accord with human nature* is the absolute fundament of Pestalozzi's theory of education. Every fur-

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ther demand is nothing other than a specific clarification of this first, basic demand. Anything asked of a child which goes against its nature, will deform it and lead it away from the ultimate goal of education: full humanity.

Thus the very first requirement for a teacher who wants to teach and educate in the spirit of Pestalozzi is to ask himself at every turn: *Does what I am aiming for, what I am doing, what I ask the children to do, what I forbid them to do, correspond to the children's nature, is it in accord with human nature?*

That means that it is incumbent on the teacher to constantly improve his understanding of human nature. Pestalozzi called himself an 'authority on human nature' and as such he came to the conviction that individuals are not simply given the task of realising their full humanity but that nature has equipped them with the necessary *powers and faculties*. At birth these are still undeveloped and it is the task of the school and the home to support them in the *development of their powers and faculties*.

However, in this demand for the *development of powers and faculties*, hereditary factors, which can lead to differing talents, are only of secondary importance for Pestalozzi; what he understands first and foremost by 'powers and faculties' are those general human faculties which allow the individual to recognise the truth, make rational judgments, feel love that comes from the heart, experience religious faith and pursue all his affairs with vigour — that is to enjoy full humanity. But these powers are present in every individual in slightly different degrees, with the result that each person should realise his life's goal — full humanity — in his own way. Education can only be successful when it takes account of the unique, individual qualities in every student. (To avoid unrealistic demands on teachers by parents, I must point out that it is a misunderstanding to think that taking account of a pupil's individuality means granting his every wish and allowing each individual special rights. What it does mean is that teachers should be aware of what each pupil is capable of achieving, of his own special talents and should react spontaneously to his performance and his behaviour.)

As regards the potential for development of these powers and faculties, Pestalozzi is an optimist. He is convinced that the powers and faculties of each individual have an innate urge to develop. Thus he

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writes in his last important book, *Schwanengesang* (Swansong, 1825): *The nature of these faculties within each person drives him to use them. The eye wants to see, the ear to hear, the foot wants to walk and the hand to grasp. And, equally, the heart wants to believe and love, the mind wants to think. There is in every faculty of human nature an urge to rise from its inert, unskilled state to become a trained power.*

The aim for the teacher, therefore, is to encourage these faculties in their urge to develop, that is, to give them a helping hand. Results would be better in all our schools if teachers employed (and were allowed by the authorities to employ) and fostered first and foremost those activities which the pupils *want* to tackle — or at least are happy to tackle when we suggest them. Of course, to do this we would have to abandon the idea that all children must learn the same things, must always do the same things and must achieve the same goals. Despite that, all the basic requirements would be fulfilled because, in an atmosphere in which they feel their efforts are taken seriously, the children will stimulate and help each other, and be willing to accept stimulation from the teacher. I am well aware that this will make great demands on the teacher's competence as a teacher and that the organisation of the children in year-groups is not the ideal form for such an approach. Moreover, I am also aware that there are children who, as a result of poor upbringing on the part of their parents, are so spoilt or unruly that they would scarcely be able to take advantage of the freedom described here and thus provide support for all the arguments for tight control.

As an 'authority on human nature', Pestalozzi frequently expounded the view that human nature is not a single, harmonious whole. From the very beginning it is marked by tension and contradictions: our 'sensual, animal nature', which seeks pleasure and tries to avoid pain, confronts our 'higher, eternal, divine, inner' nature which enables the individual to enjoy a life of fulfilment in truth and love. While Pestalozzi believed that our 'animal nature' is the fundament of human existence, he was convinced that the individual can only know true fulfilment when our 'higher nature' receives its due and keeps the selfishness inherent in our animal nature within bounds. This Pestalozzi calls 'morality'.

In practice, the question that naturally arises is: How can I tell if what I am doing with the children is in accord with human nature?

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There is one simple rule: teaching is in accord with human nature when the pupils throw themselves into their tasks with enjoyment. When that happens, hardly any conflict arises between pupils, or between the teacher and pupils. When, on the other hand, the children react against a topic or a particular teaching method or in a particular situation, are unwilling to learn or get distracted, that is usually a sign that the teaching is not in accord with human nature.

This last statement is likely to irritate teachers who take great pains in choosing and preparing topics and the means of putting them across, only to find that they still fail to get through to especially difficult children. It is quite understandable that they would reject the criticism that they were ignoring the principle of teaching in accord with human nature.

The answer from Pestalozzi's point of view would be that it is most likely that the previous education of these children had not been in accord with their nature and that consequently lessons which are successful for the general run of pupils are not in accord with the nature of *these children*. One could compare such a teacher with a doctor: if his tried and tested medicines prove ineffective, he does not look for a reason for their failure in the patient, simply in order to prove to himself that his treatment is correct; on the contrary, he tries different medicines and therapies. Similarly it is *pointless* (if understandable) for a teacher to cite the way children have been neglected and spoilt in order to justify his own methods. The failure is evident and leaves us with two alternatives: either we accept it, with all the consequences for the children concerned, for the class and the teacher, or we seek the course that is true to human nature, even in this difficult situation. In that case, to educate in accord with human nature means to accept *the nature of the specific child*, however twisted and messed-up it might appear to be, as a fact in which everything else must be grounded. And then it does indeed sometimes turn out that school, with some or all of its constituents and constraints (a particular teacher, with his particular style of communication and teaching, a specific class group, the demands of the timetable, specific methods, more general conditions such as the size of the school, things that happen on the way to school etc.) does indeed go directly against the natural needs of a difficult child. The reasons for

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compulsory education make sense, but we must never forget that this compulsion comes at a price and — unfortunately — claims its victims. Often enough there is no other solution but to collaborate with the parents, authorities and psychologists in looking for pragmatic solutions, in which we preserve as much that is in accord with the child's nature as possible, while accepting the regrettable, if necessary, restrictions on it. To abandon the idea of education in accord with a child's nature, however, and to seek a solution in measures which ignore it, is definitely going down the wrong route.

'Accord with human nature' has many different aspects and consequently there are often several reasons why pupils may sometimes join in with gusto and at others be unwilling to learn. Here I will limit myself to two examples of going against the principle of teaching in accord with human nature:

*Choosing a topic or teaching method that is not appropriate for the age of the pupils.* Very often our syllabuses and teaching materials, or inexperienced teachers, expect pupils to cope with topics or approaches which mean nothing to them or in which they have no real interest. The younger the children are, the more concrete, tangible, immediate a topic must be. Unfortunately this principle is often not observed. Thus in mathematics, children are often introduced to abstract formulae far too soon, when they cannot see their relevance for practical applications. Or in language classes pupils are burdened with ideas from linguistic theory at much too early an age, instead of being encouraged to discover the richness of language, the joy of speaking correctly, of writing fluently through exercises appropriate for children of their age. Or in history classes they find themselves confronted with political and sociological ideas and expected to pursue all kinds of research of their own, instead of being introduced to the lives of people in past ages through vivid, exciting stories or films, which will awaken their interest in historical events and processes. In geography they are expected to interpret statistical tables and explain global phenomena, instead of first of all being made familiar with the variety of landscapes and the people who inhabit them through stories, pictures, videos or, if possible, outings and trips. And biology classes often deal with molecular biology, genetics and biochemistry at an age when the children ought to start by

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looking at a flower, getting to know the most frequent plants or observing an animal, getting to know it and studying its behaviour.

*Over-emphasis on the pupils' future needs.* It is especially non-teachers who, when dealing with educational matters, tend to this one-sided view. Naturally schools have the task of preparing children for adult life. But that is not done by seeing in them primarily the future adults, but by responding to their *present needs and their present psychological state*. Much of what has to be done in school has to be done because the child needs it *at that point* for his healthy development. Taking a child's present state seriously is to nourish him psychologically and mentally.

I would like to give an example to illustrate this: the treatment of the fairy tale 'Hans in Luck' at infant level. The plot is simple: after serving his seven-year apprenticeship Hans is paid with a 'lump of silver as big as his head'. But he immediately exchanges it for a horse, that for a cow, the cow for a pig, the pig for a goose and the goose for a grindstone. With every exchange he feels happier and more fortunate than ever, and he feels happiest and most fortunate when he has got rid of everything. While it is true that the child will profit from this in terms of language learning — development of reading skills, expression, vocabulary and spelling — that alone does not justify dealing with Grimms' fairy tales. A sensitive teacher knows that *at this stage* children inhabit a world of images, which is reflected in the symbols of myths and dreams, and for that reason need the nourishment of such fairy tales. At that age a child is receptive to profound truths, as long as they are not presented in abstract, rational terms as moral instruction, but in living images. Without it needing to be pointed out explicitly, a child is quite capable of seeing in Hans simply a human being who has acquired a worldly treasure through hard work and faithfulness. But at the same time this lump of silver is the symbol of an inner treasure — the knowledge of the relativity of earthly riches. By responding fully to the true needs of each moment, and thus unburdening himself more and more of material possessions, he finds inner freedom, true fortune and happiness.

If schools were to concentrate solely on the things the majority of students are actually going to need in later life, we could presumably leave out drawing, writing stories, singing and looking at poems. We

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could also manage without most of the subject area of Man and the Environment, since in general grown-ups either ignore or forget these matters. And, anyway, much of what is needed for life is learnt outside school. If, despite all that, we as teachers continue to deal with this material, it is because the children need it *now* and by working with them in the right way can develop the faculties which are essential to enable them to live the life of a full human being such as Pestalozzi had in mind.