On Moral Education

By HERBERT SPENCER

Education is a perennially important and controversial subject, especially in a country as child-centered as the United States. Within libertarian ranks, an unlimited diversity of viewpoint prevails, ranging from rigorous traditionalists to ultra-progressives. Among the numerous libertarians in the Los Angeles area, a controversy is now raging between the Cardin and Montessori methods of education. We believe that the views of Herbert Spencer, the great 19th century English social philosopher, can provide a much-needed but totally neglected contribution toward a rational solution to many of these disputes, a solution grounded on education in cause-and-effect. The following article is condensed from the chapter on “Moral Education” in Herbert Spencer’s Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical (A. L. Burt Company, n.d.).

While it is seen that for the purpose of gaining a livelihood, an elaborate preparation is needed, it appears to be thought that for the bringing up of children, no preparation whatever is needed. In the absence of this preparation, the management of children, and more especially the moral management, is lamentably bad. Parents either never think about the matter at all, or else their conclusions are crude, and inconsistent. In most cases, and especially on the part of mothers, the treatment adopted on every occasion is that which the impulse of the moment prompts: it springs not from
any reasoned-out conviction as to what will most con-
duce to the child’s welfare, but merely expresses the
passing parental feelings, whether good or ill; and varies
from hour to hour as these feelings vary. Or if these
blind dictates of passion are supplemented by any defi-
nite doctrines and methods, they are those that have
been handed down from the past, or those suggested
by the remembrances of childhood, or those adopted
from nurses and servants—methods devised not by the
enlightenment, but by the ignorance of the time.

Let us go on to consider the true aims and methods
of moral education. When a child falls or runs its head
against the table, it suffers a pain, the remembrance
of which tends to make it more careful for the future;
and by an occasional repetition of like experiences, it
is eventually disciplined into a proper guidance of its
movements. If it lays hold of the fire-bars, thrusts its
finger into the candle-flame, or spills boiling water
on any part of its skin, the resulting burn or scald is
a lesson not easily forgotten.

Now in these and like cases, Nature illustrates to us
in the simplest way, the true theory and practice of moral
discipline. Observe, in the first place, that in bodily
injuries and their penalties we have misconduct and its
consequences reduced to their simplest forms. Though
according to their popular acceptations, right and wrong
are words scarcely applicable to actions that have none
but direct bodily effects; yet whoever considers the
matter will see that such actions must be as much
classifiable under these heads as any other actions.
Note, in the second place, the character of the punish-
ments by which these physical transgressions are pre-
vented. Punishments, we call them, in the absence of
a better word; for they are not punishments in the literal
sense. They are not artificial and unnecessary inflic-
tions of pain; but are simply the beneficent checks to
actions that are essentially at variance with bodily
welfare—checks in the absence of which life would
quickly be destroyed by bodily injuries. It is the pecu-
liarity of these penalties, if we must so call them,
that they are nothing more than the unavoidable conse-
quences of the deeds which they follow; they are nothing
more than the inevitable reactions entailed by the child’s
actions.

Let it be further borne in mind that these painful
reactions are proportionate to the degree in which the
organic laws have been transgressed. A slight acci-
dent brings a slight pain, a more serious one, a greater
pain. When a child tumbles over the doorstep, it is not ordained that it shall suffer in excess of the amount necessary, with the view of making it still more cautious than the necessary suffering will make it. But from its daily experience it is left to learn the greater or less penalties of greater or less errors, and to behave accordingly. And then mark, lastly, that these natural reactions which follow the child's wrong actions, are constant, direct, unhesitating, and not to be escaped. No threats; but a silent, rigorous performance.

Still more significant will these general truths appear, when we remember that they hold throughout adult life as well as throughout infantile life. It is by an experimentally-gained knowledge of the natural consequences, that men and women are checked when they go wrong. After home education has ceased, and when there are no longer parents and teachers to forbid this or that kind of conduct, there comes into play a discipline like that by which the young child is taught its first lessons in self-guidance. If the youth entering upon the business of life idles away his time and fulfills slowly or unskillfully the duties entrusted to him, there by and by follows the natural penalty: he is discharged, and left to suffer for awhile the evils of relative poverty. On the unpunctual man, failing alike his appointments of business and pleasure, there continually fall the consequent inconveniences, losses, and deprivations. The avaricious tradesman who charges too high a rate of profit, loses his customers, and so is checked in his greediness. And so throughout the life of every citizen. In the quotation so often made a propos of these cases—"The burnt child dreads the fire"—we see not only that the analogy between this social discipline and Nature's early discipline of infants is universally recognized; but we also see an implied conviction that this discipline is of the most efficient kind.

Have we not here, then, the guiding principle of moral education? Must we not infer that the system so beneficent in its effects, alike during infancy and maturity, will be equally beneficent throughout youth? Is it not manifest that as "ministers and interpreters of Nature" it is the function of parents to see that their children habitually experience the true consequences of their conduct—the natural reactions: neither warding them off, nor intensifying them, nor putting artificial consequences in place of them?

Probably, however, not a few will contend that already most parents do this—that the punishments they inflict
are, in the majority of cases, the true consequences of ill-conduct—that parental anger, venting itself in harsh words and deeds, is the result of a child's transgression. But observe that the discipline on which we are insisting is not so much the experience of parental approbation, or disapprobation, which, in most cases, is only a secondary consequence of a child's conduct; but it is the experience of those results which would naturally flow from the conduct in the absence of parental opinion or interference. The truly instructive and salutary consequences are not those inflicted by parents when they take upon themselves to be Nature's proxies; but they are those inflicted by Nature herself. We will endeavor to make this distinction clear by a few illustrations, which, while they show what we mean by natural reactions as contrasted with artificial ones, will afford some directly practical suggestions.

In every family where there are young children there almost daily occur cases of what mothers and servants call "making a litter." A child has had out its box of toys, and leaves them scattered about the floor. In most cases the trouble of rectifying this disorder falls anywhere but in the right place; if in the nursery, the nurse herself, with many grumblings undertakes the task; if below stairs, the task usually devolves either on one of the elder children or on the housemaid; the transgressor being visited with nothing more than a scolding. In this very simple case, however, there are many parents wise enough to follow out, more or less consistently, the normal course—that of making the child itself collect the toys or shreds. The labor of putting things in order is the true consequence of having put them in disorder. Every trader in his office, every wife in her household, has daily experience of this fact. And if education be a preparation for the business of life, then every child should also, from the beginning, have daily experience of this fact. If the natural penalty be met by any refractory behavior, then the proper course is to let the child feel the ulterior reaction consequent on its disobedience. Having refused or neglected to pick up and put away the things it has scattered about, and having thereby entailed the trouble of doing this on someone else, the child should, on subsequent occasions, be denied the means of giving this trouble. When next it petitions for its toy-box, the reply of its mamma should be—"The last time you had your toys you left them lying on the floor, and Jane had to pick them up. So that, as you will not put away your toys when you have done with them, I cannot let you have them." This is obviously a natural consequence, neither increased nor lessened; and must be so recog-
nized by a child. The penalty comes, too, at the mo-
ment when it is most keenly felt. A new-born desire
is balked at the moment of anticipated gratification;
and the strong impression so produced can scarcely
fail to have an effect on the future conduct. Add to
which, that, by this method, a child is early taught
the lesson which cannot be learned too soon, that in
this world of ours pleasures are rightly to be obtained
only by labor.

Take another case. Not long since we had frequently
to listen to the reprimands visited on a little girl who
was scarcely ever ready in time for the daily walk.
Of eager disposition, and apt to become thoroughly
absorbed in the occupation of the moment, Constance
never thought of putting on her things until the rest
were ready. The governess and the other children had
almost invariably to wait; and from the mamma there
almost invariably came the same scolding. Utterly as
this system failed it never occurred to the mamma
to let Constance experience the natural penalty. Nor,
indeed, would she try it when it was suggested to her.
In the world the penalty of being behind time is the loss
of some advantage that would else have been gained;
the train is gone; or the steamboat is just leaving its
moorings. And every one, in cases perpetually occur-
ing, may see that it is the prospective deprivations
entailed by being too late which prevent people from
being too late. Is not the inference obvious? Should
not these prospective deprivations control the child's
conduct also? If Constance is not ready at the appoint-
ed time, the natural result is that of being left behind,
and losing her walk. And no one can doubt that after
having once or twice remained at home while the rest
were enjoying themselves in the fields, and after hav-
ing felt that this loss of a much-prized gratification
was solely due to want of promptitude, some amend-
ment would take place. At any rate, the measure would
be more effective than that perpetual scolding which
ends only in producing callousness.

Again, when children, with more than usual carelessness,
break or lose the things given to them, the natural
penalty—the penalty which makes grown-up persons more
careful—is the consequent inconvenience. The want of
the lost or damaged article, and the cost of supplying
its place, are the experiences by which men and women
are disciplined in these matters; and the experience of
children should be as much as possible assimilated to
theirs. We do not refer to that early period at which
Toys are pulled to pieces in the process of learning
their physical properties, and at which the results of
carelessness cannot be understood; but to a later per-
od, when the meaning and advantages of property are
perceived. When a boy, old enough to possess a pen-
knife, uses it so roughly as to snap the blade, a thought-
less parent, or some indulgent relative, will commonly
forthwith buy him another; not seeing that, by doing
this, a valuable lesson is lost. In such a case, a father
may properly explain that penknives cost money, and
that to get money requires labor; that he cannot afford
to purchase new penknives for one who loses or breaks
them; and that until he sees evidence of greater care-
fulness he must decline to make good the loss. A parallel
discipline may be used as a means of checking extrava-
gance.

These few familiar instances, here chosen because
of the simplicity with which they illustrate our point,
will make clear to everyone the distinction between
those natural penalties which we contend are the truly
efficient ones, and those artificial penalties which par-
ents commonly substitute for them. Let us note the
many and great superiorities of this principle over the
principle, or rather the empirical practice, which pre-
vails in most families.

In the first place, right conceptions of cause and ef-
fact are early formed; and by frequent and consistent
experience are eventually rendered definite and com-
plete. Proper conduct in life is much better guaran-
teed when the good and evil consequences of actions
are rationally understood, than when they are merely
believed on authority. A child who finds that disor-
derliness entails the subsequent trouble of putting things
in order, or who misses a gratification from dilator-
ness, or whose want of care is followed by the loss or
breakage of some much-prized possession, not only ex-
periences a keenly-felt consequence, but gains a knowl-
gedge of causation; both the one and the other being
just like those which adult life will bring. Whereas a
child who in such cases receives some reprimand or
some factitious penalty, not only experiences a conse-
quence for which it often cares very little, but lacks
that instruction respecting the essential natures of good
and evil conduct, which it would else have gathered.
It is a vice of the common system of artificial rewards
and punishments, that by substituting for the natural
results of misbehavior certain threatened tasks or cas-
tigations, it produces a radically wrong standard of
moral guidance. Having throughout infancy and boy-
hood always regarded parental or tutorial displeasure
as the result of a forbidden action, the youth has gained
an established association of ideas between such action
and such displeasure, as cause and effect; and conse-
quently when parents and tutors have abdicated, and
their displeasure is not to be feared, the restraint
on a forbidden action is in great measure removed;
the true restraints, the natural reactions, having yet
to be learned by sad experience. As writes one who
has had personal knowledge of this short-sighted sys-
tem: "Young men let loose from school plunge into
every description of extravagance; they know no rule
of action—they are ignorant of the reasons for moral
conduct—they have no foundation to rest upon."

Another great advantage of this natural system of
discipline is, that it is a system of pure justice; and
will be recognized by every child as such. Whoso suf-
fers nothing more than the evil which obviously fol-
lows naturally from his own misbehavior, is much less
likely to think himself wrongly treated than if he suf-
fers an evil artificially inflicted on him; and this will
be true of children as of men. Take the case of a boy
who is habitually reckless of his clothes, scrambles
through hedges without caution, or is utterly regard-
less of mud. If he is beaten, or sent to bed, he is apt
to regard himself as ill-used; and his mind is more
likely to be occupied by thinking over his injuries
than repenting of his transgressions. But suppose he
is required to rectify as far as he can the harm he
has done—to clean off the mud with which he has cov-
ered himself, or to mend the tear as well as he can.
Will he not feel that the evil is one of his own produc-
ing? Will he not while paying this penalty be contin-
uously conscious of the connection between it and its
cause? And will he not, spite his irritation, recognize
more or less clearly the justice of the arrangement?

Again, the tempers both of parents and children are
much less liable to be ruffled under this system than
under the ordinary system. Instead of letting children
experience the painful results which naturally follow
from wrong conduct, the usual course pursued by par-
ents is to inflict themselves certain other painful re-
sults. A double mischief arises from this. Making, as
they do, multiplied family laws; and identifying their
own supremacy and dignity with the maintenance of
these laws; it happens that every transgression comes
to be regarded as an offense against themselves, and a
cause of anger on their part. Add to which the further
irritations which result from taking upon themselves,
in the shape of extra labor or cost, those evil conse-
quences which should have been allowed to fall on
wrong-doers. Similarly with the children. Penalties
which the necessary reaction of things brings round
upon them—penalties which are inflicted by an impersonal agency, produce an irritation that is comparatively slight and transient; whereas, penalties which are voluntarily inflicted by a parent, and are afterward remembered as caused by him or her, produce an irritation both greater and more continued.

Just consider how disastrous would be the result if this empirical method were pursued from the beginning. Suppose it were possible for parents to take upon themselves the physical sufferings entailed on their children by ignorance and awkwardness; and that while bearing these evil consequences they visited on their children certain other evil consequences, with the view of teaching them the impropriety of their conduct. Suppose that when a child, who had been forbidden to meddle with the kettle, spilt some boiling water on its foot, the mother vicariously assumed the scald and gave a blow in place of it; and similarly in all other cases. Would not the daily mishaps be sources of far more anger than now? Would not there be chronic ill-temper on both sides? Yet an exactly parallel policy is pursued in after years. A father who punishes his boy for carelessly or wilfully breaking a sister's toy, and then himself pays for a new toy, does substantially this same thing—inflicts an artificial penalty on the transgressor, and takes the natural penalty on himself; his own feelings and those of the transgressor being alike needlessly irritated. If he simply required restitution to be made, he would produce far less heartburning. If he told the boy that a new toy must be bought at his, the boy's cost, and that his supply of pocket-money must be withheld to the needful extent, there would be much less cause for ebullition of temper on either side; while in the deprivation afterward felt, the boy would experience the equitable and salutary consequence. In brief, the system of discipline by natural reactions is less injurious to temper, alike because it is perceived on both sides to be nothing more than pure justice, and because it more or less substitutes the impersonal agency of nature for the personal agency of parents.

At present, mothers and fathers are mostly considered by their offspring as friend-enemies. Determined as their impressions inevitably are by the treatment they receive; and oscillating as that treatment does between bribery and thwarting, between petting and scolding, between gentleness and castigation; children necessarily acquire conflicting beliefs respecting the parental character. A mother commonly thinks it quite sufficient to tell her little boy that she is his best friend;
and assuming that he is in duty bound to believe her, concludes that he will forthwith do so. "It is all for your good"; "I know what is proper for you better than you do yourself"; "You are not old enough to understand it now, but when you grow up you will thank me for doing what I do";--these and like assertions, are daily reiterated. Meanwhile the boy is daily suffering positive penalties; and is hourly forbidden to do this, that, and the other, which he was anxious to do. By words he hears that his happiness is the end in view; but from the accompanying deeds he habitually receives more or less pain. Utterly incompetent as he is to understand that future which his mother has in view, or how this treatment conduces to the happiness of that future, he judges by such results as he feels; and finding these results anything but pleasant, he becomes skeptical respecting these professions of friendship. And is it not folly to expect any other issue? Must not the child judge by such evidence as he has got? And does not this evidence seem to warrant his conclusion? The mother would reason in just the same way if similarly placed. If, in the circle of her acquaintances, she found someone who was constantly thwarting her wishes, uttering sharp reprimands, and occasionally inflicting actual penalties on her, she would pay but little attention to any professions of anxiety for her welfare which accompanied these acts. Why, then, does she suppose that her boy will conclude otherwise?

But now observe how different will be the results if the system we contend for be consistently pursued--if the mother not only avoids becoming the instrument of punishment, but plays the part of a friend, by warning her boy of the punishments which Nature will inflict. Take a case; and that it may illustrate the mode in which this policy is to be early initiated, let it be one of the simplest cases. Suppose that, prompted by the experimental spirit so conspicuous in children, whose proceedings instinctively conform to the inductive method of inquiry--suppose that so prompted the child is amusing himself by lighting pieces of paper in the candle and watching them burn. If his mother is of the ordinary unreflective stamp, she will either, on the plea of keeping the child "out of mischief", or from fear that he will burn himself, command him to desist; and in case of non-compliance will snatch the paper from him. On the other hand, should he be so fortunate as to have a mother of sufficient rationality, who knows that this interest with which the child is watching the paper burn results from a healthy inquisitiveness, without which he would never have emerged
out of infantine stupidity, and who is also wise enough to consider the moral results of interference, she will reason thus: "If I put a stop to this I shall prevent the acquirement of a certain amount of knowledge. It is true that I may save the child from a burn; but what then? He is sure to burn himself sometime; and it is quite essential to his safety in life that he should learn by experience the properties of flame. Moreover, if I forbid him from running this present risk, he is sure hereafter to run the same or a greater risk when no one is present to prevent him; whereas, if he should have any accident now that I am by, I can save him from any great injury; add to which the advantage that he will have in future some dread of fire, and will be less likely to burn himself to death, or set the house in a flame when others are absent. Furthermore, were I to make him desist, I should thwart him in the pursuit of what is in itself a purely harmless, and indeed, instructive gratification; and he would be sure to regard me with more or less ill-feeling. Ignorant as he is of the pain from which I would save him, and feeling only the pain of a balked desire, he could not fail to look upon me as the cause of that pain. To save him from a hurt which he cannot conceive, and which has therefore no existence for him, I inflict upon him a hurt which he feels keenly enough; and so become, from his point of view, a minister of evil. My best course then, is simply to warn him of the danger, and to be ready to prevent any serious damage." And following out this conclusion, she says to the child--"I fear you will hurt yourself if you do that." Suppose, now, that the child perseveres, as he will very probably do; and suppose that he ends by burning himself. What are the results? In the first place he has gained an experience which he must gain eventually, and which, for his own safety he cannot gain too soon. And in the second place, he has found that his mother's disapproval or warning was meant for his welfare; he has a further positive experience of her benevolence—a further reason for placing confidence in her judgment and her kindness—a further reason for loving her.

Of course, in those occasional hazards where there is a risk of broken limbs or other serious bodily injury, forcible prevention is called for. But leaving out these extreme cases, the system pursued should be not that of guarding a child against the small dangers into which it daily runs, but that of advising and warning it against them. And by consistently pursuing this course, a much stronger filial affection will be generated than commonly exists. If here, as elsewhere,
the discipline of the natural reactions is allowed to come into play—if in all those out-of-door scramblings and in-door experiments, by which children are liable to hurt themselves, they are allowed to persevere, subject only to discussion more or less earnest according to the risk, there cannot fail to arise an ever-increasing faith in the parental friendship and guidance. Not only, as before shown, does the adoption of this principle enable fathers and mothers to avoid the chief part of that odium which attaches to the infliction of positive punishment; but, as we here see, it enables them further to avoid the odium that attaches to constant thwartings; and even to turn each of those incidents which commonly cause squabbles, into a means of strengthening the mutual good feeling. Instead of being told in words, which deeds seem to contradict, that their parents are their best friends, children will learn this truth by a consistent daily experience; and so learning it, will acquire a degree of trust and attachment which nothing else can give.

Bear constantly in mind the truth that the aim of your discipline should be to produce a self-governing being; not to produce a being to be governed by others. Were your children fated to pass their lives as slaves, you could not too much accustom them to slavery during their childhood; but as they are by and by to be free men, with no one to control their daily conduct, you cannot too much accustom them to self-control while they are still under your eye. Aim, therefore, to diminish the amount of parental government as fast as you can substitute for it in your child’s mind that self-government arising from foresight of results. In infancy a considerable amount of absolutism is necessary. A three-year-old urchin playing with an open razor, cannot be allowed to learn by this discipline of consequences; for the consequences may, in such case, be too serious. But as intelligence increases, the number of instances calling for peremptory interference may be, and should be diminished; with the view of gradually ending them as maturity is approached. All periods of transition are dangerous; and the most dangerous is the transition from the restraint of the family circle to the non-restraint of the world. Hence the importance of pursuing the policy we advocate; which, alike by cultivating a child’s faculty of self-restraint, by continually increasing the degree in which it is left to its self-constraint, and by so bringing it, step by step, to a state of unaided self-constraint, obliterates the ordinary sudden and hazardous change from externally-governed youth to internally-governed maturity.
Lastly, always remember that to educate rightly is not a simple and easy thing, but a complex and extremely difficult thing: the hardest task which devolves upon adult life. If you would carry out with success a rational and civilized system, you must be prepared for considerable mental exertion—for some study, some ingenuity, some patience, some self-control. You will have habitually to trace the consequences of conduct—to consider what are the results which in adult life follow certain kind of acts; and then you will have to devise methods by which parallel results shall be entailed on the parallel acts of your children.

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