

Robert Owen, *A New View of Society*

Robert Owen (1771-1858), entrepreneur and social reformer, was a controversial personality who profited enormously from his enterprise in the era of early industrialisation and then set about trying to remedy its excesses. Much of his thinking, which found best expression in the essays on *A New View of Society*, derived from his own experience managing cotton mills, most famously at New Lanark, which became a test-bed for his reforms. There and elsewhere he strongly emphasised the importance of environment, education, and ultimately, co-operation. The essays, four in number, were written at different times from 1812, initially published as pamphlets during 1813-14 and then combined into a single volume (the so-called 2nd edition of 1816). The text here, approximately half the original, tries to convey the flavour of the whole work, and by paraphrasing particularly long-winded sections provides a clear focus on Owen's main 'principles'. Many of these still have resonance for our own times, particularly the roles of the individual and government in society.

The shortened and paraphrased sections appear in italics and the editorial sub-headings are designed to emphasise the main subject matter of each section of Owen's text.

First Essay

Character Formation and Mistaken Principles

[Original Dedication of First Essay. Omitted in subsequent Editions.]
to

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE ESQ., M.P.

"Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of whose [*sic*] who have influence in the affairs of men."

According to the last returns under the Population Act, the poor and working Classes of Great Britain and Ireland have been found to exceed fifteen millions of persons, or nearly three-fourths of the population of the British Islands.

The characters of these persons are now permitted to be very generally formed without proper guidance or direction, and, in many cases, under circumstances which directly impel them to a course of extreme vice and misery; thus rendering them the worst and most dangerous subjects in the empire; while the far greater part of the remainder of the community are educated upon the most mistaken principles of human nature, such, indeed, as cannot fail to produce a general conduct throughout society, totally unworthy of the character of rational beings.

The first thus unhappily situated are the poor and the uneducated profligate among the working classes, who are now trained to commit crimes, for the commission of which they are afterwards punished.

The second is the remaining mass of the population, who are now instructed to believe, or at least to acknowledge, that certain principles are unerringly true, and to act as though they were grossly false; thus filling the world with folly and inconsistency, and making society, throughout all its ramifications, a scene of insincerity and counteraction.

In this state the world has continued to the present time; its evils have been and are continually increasing; they cry aloud, for efficient corrective measures, which if we longer delay, general disorder must ensue.

Based on the fundamental principle that character formation can be governed, non-sectarian, non-partisan attempts must be made to improve society:

The chief object of these Essays is to assist and forward investigations of such vital importance to the well being of this country, and of society in general.

The view of the subject which is about to be given has arisen from extensive experience for upwards of twenty years, during which period its truth and importance have been proved by multiplied experiments. That the writer may not be charged with precipitation or presumption, he has had the principle and its consequences examined, scrutinised, and fully canvassed, by some of the most learned, intelligent, and competent characters of the present day: who, on every principle and duty as well as of interest, if they had discovered error in either, would have exposed it; - but who, on the contrary, have fairly acknowledged their incontrovertible truth and practical importance.

Assured, therefore, that his principles are true, he proceeds with confidence, and courts the most ample and free discussion of the subject;

courts it for the sake of humanity - for the sake of his fellow creatures - millions of whom experience sufferings which, were they to be unfolded, would compel those who govern the world to exclaim - "Can these things exist, and we have no knowledge of them?" But they do exist - and even the heartrending statements which were made known to the public during the discussions upon Negro slavery, do not exhibit more afflicting scenes, than those which, in various parts of the world, daily arise from the injustice of society towards itself; from the inattention of mankind to the circumstances which incessantly surround them; and from the want of a correct knowledge of human nature in those who govern and control the affairs of men.

If these circumstances did not exist to an extent almost incredible, it would be unnecessary now to contend for a principle regarding Man, which scarcely requires more than to be fairly stated to make it self-evident.

This principle is, that "*Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.*"

The principle as now stated is a broad one, and, if it should be found to be true, cannot fail to give a new character to legislative proceedings, and such a character as will be most favourable to the well-being of society. The principles on which this knowledge is founded must universally prevail.

In preparing the way for the introduction of these principles, it cannot now be necessary to enter into the detail of facts to prove that children can be trained to acquire "*any language, sentiments, belief, or any bodily habits and manners, not contrary to human nature*".

The Pursuit of Happiness via Knowledge

The lessons of history show man his duty to society - the promotion of common happiness, which self-evidently lies within his power, must be the inevitable goal:

Possessing, then, the knowledge of a power so important, which, when understood, is capable of being wielded with the certainty of a law of nature, and which would gradually remove the evils which now chiefly afflict mankind, shall we permit it to remain dormant and useless, and suffer the plagues of society perpetually to exist and increase?

No: the time is now arrived when the public mind of this country and the general state of the world, call imperatively for the introduction of this all-pervading principle, not only in theory, but into practice.

Nor can any human power now impede its rapid progress. Silence will not retard its course, and opposition will give increased celerity to its movements. The commencement of the work will, in fact, ensure its accomplishment; henceforth all the irritating angry passions arising from ignorance of the true cause of bodily and mental character, will gradually subside, and be replaced by the most frank and conciliating confidence and good-will.

Nor will it be possible hereafter for comparatively a few individuals, unintentionally to occasion the rest of mankind to be surrounded by circumstances which inevitably form such characters as they afterwards deem it a duty and a right to punish even to death; and that, too, while they themselves have been the instruments of forming those characters. Such proceedings not only create innumerable evils to the directing few, but essentially retard them and the great mass of society from attaining the enjoyment of a high degree of positive happiness. Instead of punishing crimes after they have permitted the human character to be formed so as to commit them, they will adopt the only means which can be adopted to prevent the existence of those crimes; means by which they may be most easily prevented.

Happily for poor traduced and degraded human nature, the principle for which we now contend will speedily divest it of all the ridiculous and absurd mystery with which it has been hitherto enveloped by the ignorance of preceding times: and all the complicated and counteracting motives for good conduct, which have been multiplied almost to infinity, will be reduced to one single principle of action, which, by its evident operation and sufficiency, shall render this intricate system unnecessary, and ultimately supersede it in ail parts of the earth. That principle is *the happiness of self, clearly understood and uniformly practised; which can only be attained by conduct that must promote the happiness of the community.*

For that Power which governs and pervades the universe has evidently so formed man, that he must progressively pass from a state of ignorance to intelligence, the limits of which it is not for man himself to define; and in that progress to discover, that his individual happiness can be increased and extended only in proportion as he actively endeavours to increase and extend the happiness of all around him. For this state of matters, and for all the gradual changes contemplated, the extraordinary events of the present times have essentially contributed to prepare the way.

Even the late Ruler of France, although immediately influenced by the most mistaken principles of ambition, has contributed to this happy result, by shaking to its foundation that mass of superstition and bigotry,

which on the continent of Europe had been accumulating for ages, until it had so overpowered and depressed the human intellect, that to attempt improvement without its removal would have been most unavailing. These transactions, in which millions have been immolated,⁸⁵ or consigned to poverty and bereft of friends, will be preserved in the records of time, and impress future ages with a just estimation of the principles now about to be introduced into practice; and will thus prove perpetually useful to all succeeding generations.

For the direful effects of Napoleon's government have created the most deep-rooted disgust at notions which could produce a belief that such conduct was glorious, or calculated to increase the happiness of even the individual by whom it was pursued.

Rational Education as the Way Forward

Owen here acknowledges the work of the contemporary educationalists, 'The Rev. Dr Bell⁸⁶ and Mr Joseph Lancaster',⁸⁷ who have proved the error of "any new exclusive system":

For it is now obvious that such a system must be destructive of the happiness of the excluded, by their seeing others enjoy what they are not permitted to possess; and also that it tends, by creating opposition, from the justly injured feelings of the excluded, in proportion to the extent of the exclusion, to diminish the happiness even of the privileged: the former therefore can have no rational motive for its continuance. It will therefore be the essence of wisdom in the privileged class to co-operate sincerely and cordially with those who desire not to touch one iota of the supposed

⁸⁵ *immolated*: sacrificed.

⁸⁶ Andrew Bell (1753-1832), Scottish Episcopal clergyman and founder of the monitorial 'Madras System of Education', which he developed as a chaplain in the East India Company and as superintendent of the Madras Male Orphan Asylum. Finding himself short-staffed, he enlisted the aid of the scholars themselves, under a system of mutual tuition, promoted in his pamphlet, *An Experiment in Education* (1797). Although not immediately popular the system was adapted by Lancaster. After the Church of England became concerned by the spread of Non-Conformist Lancasterian schools, it appointed Bell superintendent of its National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, set up in 1811.

⁸⁷ Joseph Lancaster (1778-1838), a Quaker who opened a free school for the poor in London in 1798, according to the monitorial system, which he recommended in a pamphlet in 1803. The system, emphasising memorisation and largely based on Bible teaching, was non-denominational and as such attractive to Non-Conformists, adopting it. Children, sometimes numbering hundreds, were gathered together in one room and seated in rows, usually of ten. Older boys (monitors) took charge under the teacher's supervision. Corporal punishment did not feature and discipline was maintained by rewards. In 1808 the Royal Lancasterian Society was formed (later renamed the British and Foreign School Society) to promote the system.

advantages which they now possess; and whose first and last wish is to increase the particular happiness of those classes, as well as the general happiness of society. Society has hitherto been ignorant of the true means by which the most useful and valuable character may be formed.

This ignorance being removed, experience will soon teach us how to form character, individually and generally, so as to give the greatest sum of happiness to the individual and to mankind.

These principles require only to be known in order to establish themselves; the outline of our future proceedings then becomes clear and defined, nor will they permit us henceforth to wander from the right path. They direct that the governing powers of all countries should establish rational plans for the education and general formation of the characters of their subjects. *These plans must be devised to train children from their earliest infancy in good habits of every description (which will of course prevent them from acquiring those of falsehood and deception). They must afterwards be rationally educated, and their labour be usefully directed. Such habits and education will impress them with an active and ardent desire to promote the happiness of every individual, and that without the shadow of exception for sect, or party, or country, or climate. They will also ensure, with the fewest possible exceptions, health, strength, and vigour of body; for the happiness of man can be erected only on the foundations of health of body and peace of mind.*

Increased happiness can be effected by guiding human characteristics away from the path of evil: once every member of society has accepted the truth of the principles, then their adoption will be welcomed:

Some of the best intentioned among the various classes in society may still say, "All this is *very delightful and very beautiful in theory, but visionaries* alone expect to see it *realised*." To this remark only one reply can or ought to be made; that *these principles have been carried most successfully into practice.*

(The beneficial effects of this practice have been experienced for many years among a population of between two and three thousand at New Lanark, in Scotland; at Munich, in Bavaria; and in the Pauper Colonies at Fredericksoord.)⁸⁸

The present Essays, therefore, are not brought forward as mere matter of speculation, to amuse the idle visionary who *thinks* in his closet, and never

⁸⁸ A House of Industry and other social experiments carried out in Munich by Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford (1753-1814) were well known to British philanthropists. The society which set up the pauper colonies in the Netherlands began about 1818. Only New Lanark was cited as a practical example in the first four editions published down to 1818-19, the others being added later.

acts in the world; but to create universal activity, pervade society with a knowledge of its true interests, and direct the public mind to the most important object to which it can be directed, - to a national proceeding for rationally forming the character of that immense mass of population which is now allowed to be so formed as to fill the world with crimes.

Shall questions of merely local and temporary interest, whose ultimate results are calculated only to withdraw pecuniary profits from one set of individuals and give them to others, engage day after day the attention of politicians and ministers; call forth petitions and delegates from the widely spread agricultural and commercial interests of the empire; - and shall the well-being of millions of the poor, half-naked, half-famished, untaught, and untrained hourly increasing to a most alarming extent in these islands, not call forth *one* petition, *one* delegate, or *one* rational effective legislative measure?

No! for such has been our education, that we hesitate not to devote years and expend millions in the *detection* and *punishment* of crimes, and in the attainment of objects whose ultimate results are, in comparison with this, insignificancy itself: and yet we have not moved one step in the true path to *prevent* crimes, and to diminish the innumerable evils with which mankind are now afflicted.

Are these false principles of conduct in those who govern the world to influence mankind permanently? And if not, *how*, and *when* is the change to commence?

These important considerations shall form the subject of the next Essay.