

Fourth Essay

[Original Dedication of Fourth Essay. First Dedication of the
Four Essays in subsequent Editions.]

to

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE REGENT OF THE
BRITISH EMPIRE

The Principles of the Former Essays applied to Government

"It is beyond all comparison better to prevent than to punish crime."

"A system of government therefore which shall prevent ignorance, and consequently crime, will be infinitely superior to one, which, by encouraging the first, creates a necessity for the last, and afterwards inflicts punishment on both."

The Aim of Government: happiness without poverty, crime or punishment

The end of government is to make the governed and the governors happy.

The government, then, is the best, which in practice produces the greatest happiness to the greatest number; including those who govern, and those who obey.

In a former Essay we said, and it admits of practical demonstration, that by adopting the proper means, man may by degrees be trained to live in any part of the world without poverty, without crime, and without punishment; for all these are the effects of error in the various systems of training and governing; - error proceeding from very gross ignorance of human nature.

It is of primary importance to make this ignorance manifest, and to show what are the means which are endowed with that transcendent efficacy.

We have also said that man may be trained to acquire any sentiments and habits, or any character; and no one now, possessing pretensions to the knowledge of human nature, will deny that the government of any independent community may form the individuals of that community into the best, or into the worst characters.

If there be one duty therefore more imperative than another, on the government of every country, it is, that it should adopt, without delay, the proper means to form those sentiments and habits in the people, which shall give the most permanent and substantial advantages to the individuals and to the community.

Man does not Form his own Character

And yet, with all the parade of learning contained in the myriads of volumes which have been written, and which still daily pour from the press, the knowledge of the first step of the progress which leads to human happiness remains yet unknown or disregarded by the mass of mankind.

The important knowledge to which we allude is, "That the old collectively may train the young collectively, to be ignorant and miserable, or to be intelligent and happy." Fortunate will be that government which shall first acquire this knowledge in theory, and adopt it in practice.

Owen proceeds to offer his programme of reform to the "immediate governing powers of the British Empire", in the full confidence that its

reasoned consistency will bear all scrutiny, "that it may be temperately and progressively introduced, instead of those defective national practices by which the State is now governed." ***Changes must be gradual, to lessen the shock of the passage from*** "mental darkness" to "intellectual light".

To proceed on this plan it becomes necessary to direct our attention to the actual state of the British population, to disclose the cause of those great and leading evils of which all now complain.

It will then be seen that the foundation on which these evils have been erected is ignorance, proceeding from the errors which have been impressed on the minds of the present generation by its predecessors; and chiefly by that *greatest of all errors, the notion that individuals form their own characters*. For while this most inconsistent, and therefore most absurd, of all human conceptions shall continue to be forced upon the young mind, there will remain no foundation whatever on which to build a sincere love and extended charity from man to his fellow creatures.

But destroy this hydra of human calamity, this immolator of every principle of rationality, this monster, which hitherto has effectually guarded every avenue that can lead to true benevolence and active kindness, and human happiness will be speedily established on a rock from whence it shall never more be removed.

This enemy of humanity may now be most easily destroyed. Let it be dragged forth from beneath the dark mysterious veil by which till now it has been hid from the eyes of the world. Expose it but for an instant to the clear light of intellectual day; and, as though conscious of its own deformity, it will instantaneously vanish, never to reappear.

The Call for Legal and Church Reform

Having established the irrefutable truth of the principle, the first step must be to remove those laws which "may appear to lessen", ***but in fact*** "greatly increase" ***current social evils***:

Some of the most prominent to which allusion is made, are such as encourage the consumption of ardent spirits, by fostering and extending those receptacles to seduce the ignorant and wretched, called gin-shops and pot-houses; those laws which sanction and legalize gambling among the poor, under the name of a State lottery; those which are insidiously destroying the real strength of the country, under the name of providing for the poor; and those of punishment, which, under the present irrational system of legislation, are supposed to be absolutely necessary to hold society together.

Owen calls for the repeal and modification of such laws; with the application of "intelligence" ***and*** "plain unsophisticated reason", ***the***

causes of "the existing evils which afflict society" **will be determined.** **Indeed,** "the British constitution ... is admirably adapted to effect these changes", *however, care should be taken* "that no individual of the present generation should be deprived of the emolument which he now receives, or of that which has been officially or legally promised."

The next step in national reform is to withdraw from the National Church those tenets which constitute its weakness and create its danger. Yet still, to prevent the evils of any premature change, let the Church in other respects remain as it is; because under the old established forms it may effect the most valuable purposes.

To render it truly a National Church, all tests, as they are called, that is, declarations of belief in which all cannot conscientiously join, should be withdrawn: this alteration would tend more perhaps than any other which can be devised, to give stability both to the National Church and to the State; and a conduct thus rational would at once terminate all the theological differences which now confound the intellects of men and disseminate universal discord.

Control of Alcohol and Gambling and Revision of the Poor Laws

Remove the temptation which "predisposes its victims to proceed gradually from a state of temporary insanity ... to one of madness and bodily disease" *and the path to* "private or public happiness" *is accessible. Thus the 1736 Licensing Act should be reformed and higher alcohol taxation introduced.* (Owen cites a Government report for January 1736, which gave the number of liquor houses in Middlesex, "within Westminster, Holborn, the Tower, and Finsbury division" *alone as 7,044, a figure known to be far below the real number.*) *Next, the State lottery, which is founded on* "neither more nor less than a law to legalize gambling, entrap the unwary, and rob the ignorant", *should be abolished. The national revenue will be much healthier when generated by* "a State governed by laws founded on an accurate knowledge of human nature, in which the whole population are well-trained." *Finally, Owen turns to the Poor Laws, which he sees as counterproductive, irrational and deceptive. Rather than allowing such a large proportion of the population to rely on Poor Law support,* "the proper system to supersede these laws", *Owen argues, is his "System for the Prevention of Crime, and the Formation of Character".*

The fundamental principle on which all these Essays proceed is, that "children collectively may be taught any sentiments and habits"; or, in other words, "trained to acquire any character."

It is of importance that *this principle should be for ever present in the mind, and that its truth should be established beyond even the shadow of doubt.* To the superficial observer it may appear to be an abstract truth of little value; but to the reflecting and accurate reasoner, it will speedily discover itself to be a power which ultimately must destroy the ignorance and consequent prejudices that have accumulated through all preceding ages.

History reveals the extent to which "laws and customs" can form man: evidence can be seen in the high attributes of the ancient Spartan warrior and Greek scholar as compared to their present day descendants, who must live respectively in "despotism" and "mental degradation".

Also, where formerly, the superior native American tribes roamed fearlessly through their trackless forests, uniformly exhibiting the hardy, penetrating, elevated, and sincere character, which was at a loss to comprehend how a rational being could desire to possess more than his nature could enjoy; now, on the very same soil, in the same climate, characters are formed under laws and customs so opposite, that all their bodily and mental faculties are individually exerted to obtain, if possible, ten thousand times more than any man can enjoy.

The Universality of Human Nature as the Basis for the Best Government and the Best National System of Education

Human nature, save the minute differences which are ever found in all the compounds of the creation, is one and the same in all. It is without exception universally plastic, and by judicious training *the infants of any one class in the world may be readily formed into men of any other class, even to believe and declare that conduct to be right and virtuous, and to die in its defence, which their parents had been taught to believe and say was wrong and vicious, and to oppose which, those parents would also have willingly sacrificed their lives.*

Partisan and sectarian differences and "the ideas of exclusive right and consequent superiority" stem from "mis-instructing the young mind", and "are indeed, in direct opposition to pure and undefiled religion". Such a system can no longer be sustained and should be replaced by a "system without error, . . . a system without mystery":

It becomes, then, the highest interest, and consequently the first and most important duty, of every state, to form the individual characters of which the state is composed. And if any characters, from the most ignorant and miserable to the most rational and happy, can be formed, it surely merits the deepest attention of every state to adopt those means by which the formation of the latter may be secured, and that of the former prevented.

It follows that every state, to be well-governed, ought to direct its chief attention to the formation of character; and thus the best governed state will be that which shall possess the best national system of education.

In the interest of "a well-trained, united, and happy people", the time has come for the British Government to adopt a truly national and inclusive system of popular education, "founded in the spirit of peace and of rationality."

Rational and Useful Education

Owen acknowledges the recent work of the educationalists, Dr Bell and Mr Lancaster, but he is also quick to point out "the errors which their respective systems assist to engrave on the ductile mind of infancy and childhood", . . . "for it is in the manner alone of giving instruction that these new systems are an improvement":

Children may be taught, by either Dr Bell's or Mr Lancaster's system, to read, write, account, and sew, and yet acquire the worst habits, and have their minds rendered irrational for life.

Reading and writing are merely instruments by which knowledge, either true or false, may be imparted; and, when given to children, are of little comparative value, unless they are also taught how to make a proper use of them. Yet the manner of giving instruction is one thing, the *instruction itself* another; and no two objects can be more distinct. The *worst* manner may be applied to give the *best* instruction, and the *best* manner to give the *worst* instruction. If, therefore, in a national system of education for the poor, it be desirable to adopt the *best manner*, it is surely so much the more desirable to adopt also the *best matter*, of instruction.

There is no point in merely educating the poor to an awareness of their "degradation"; a state of ignorance would be preferable. Teaching doctrine and "sectarian errors" by rote exploits the child's natural facility for mental recall instead of instilling rationally useful facts.

A scheme such as Mr Whitbread's,⁹¹ under the sole superintendence of Churchmen, "would have created a scene of confusion over the whole

⁹¹Samuel Whitbread (1758-1815), pro-reform Whig politician, son of a London brewer. MP from 1790, he was a close friend of the Radical Whig Leader, Charles James Fox (1749-1806), and an outspoken critic both of the latter's rival, the Tory, William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), and of the King, George III. He fought for civil and religious rights, abolition of the slave-trade, Catholic emancipation, higher agricultural wages and a national education system. In 1795 Whitbread introduced a minimum wage bill to the House of Commons and in 1807 a new Poor Law - both defeated. The latter included a proposal for the establishment of two years' free education for poor children. A supporter of the monitorial system advocated by Bell and Lancaster, Whitbread helped fund the Royal Lancasterian Society.

kingdom", *based as it would have been on "delusive theories" and insufficient knowledge of human nature. And yet the Church should be an obvious source of instruction:*

Let it ever be remembered that an establishment which possesses the power of propagating principles, may be rendered truly valuable when directed to inculcate a system of self-evident truth, unobstructed by inconsistencies and counteractions.

The dignitaries of the Church, and their adherents, foresaw that a national system for the education of the poor, unless it were placed under the immediate influence and management of individuals belonging to the Church, would effectually and rapidly undermine the errors, not only of their own, but of every other ecclesiastical establishment. In this foresight they evinced the superiority of their penetration over the sectaries by whom the unexclusive system is supported. The heads of the Church have wisely discovered that reason and inconsistency cannot long exist together; that the one must inevitably destroy the other, and reign paramount. They have witnessed the regular, and latterly the rapid progress which reason has made; they know that its accumulating strength cannot be much longer resisted; and, as they now see the contest is hopeless, the unsuccessful attempt to destroy the Lancastrian system of education is the last effort they will ever make to counteract the dissemination of knowledge which is now widely extending itself in every direction.

The establishment of the Rev Dr Bell's system of initiating the children of the poor in all the tenets of the Church of England, is an attempt to ward off a little longer the yet dreaded period of a change from ignorance to reason, from misery to happiness.

Let us, however, not attempt impossibilities; the task is vain and hopeless; the Church, while it adheres to the defective and injurious parts of its system, cannot be induced to act cordially in opposition to its apparent interests.

The principles here advocated give rise to no one sentiment which is not in unison with the happiness of the human race; and they impart knowledge, which renders it evident that such happiness can never be acquired until every particle of falsehood and deception shall be eradicated from the instructions which the old force upon the young.

Let us then in this spirit openly declare to the Church, that a national unexclusive plan of education for the poor, will, without the shadow of doubt, destroy all the errors which are attached to the various systems; and that, when this plan shall be fully established, not one of the tenets which is in opposition to facts can long be upheld.

This unexclusive system for the education of the poor will be speedily so improved, that by rapidly increasing strides it will firmly establish the reign of reason and happiness.

The "inconsistencies" perpetrated by "the present ill-taught race of men" must be removed and replaced by "the true, unlimited and genuine principles of mental charity".

It must surely then be the desire of every rational man, of every true friend to humanity, that a cordial co-operation and unity of action should be effected between the British Executive, the Parliament, the Church and the People, to lay a broad and firm foundation for the future happiness of themselves and the world.

Say not, my countrymen, that such an event is impracticable; for, by adopting the evident means to form a rational character in man, there is a plain and direct road opened, which, if pursued, will render its accomplishment not only possible but certain. That road, too, will be found the most safe and pleasant that human beings have ever yet travelled. It leads direct to intelligence and true knowledge, and will show the boasted acquirements of Greece, of Rome, and of all antiquity, to be the mere weakness of mental infancy. Those who travel this road will find it so straight and well-defined, that no one will be in danger of wandering from the right course. Nor is it yet a narrow or exclusive path; it admits of no exclusion; every colour of body and diversity of mind are freely and alike admitted. It is open to the human race, and it is broad and spacious enough to receive the whole, were they increased a thousand-fold.

We well know that a declaration like the one now made must sound chimerical in the ears of those who have hitherto wandered in the dark mazes of ignorance, error, and exclusion, and who have been taught folly and inconsistencies only from their cradle.

But if every known fact connected with the subject proves that, from the day in which man first saw light to that in which the sun now shines, the old collectively have taught the young collectively the sentiments and habits which the young have acquired; and that the present generation and every following generation must in like manner instruct their successors; then do we say, with a confidence founded on certainty itself, that even much more shall come to pass than has yet been foretold or promised. When these principles, derived from the unchangeable laws of nature, and equally revealed to all men, shall, as soon as they will, be publicly established in the world, no conceivable obstacle can remain to prevent a sincere and cordial union and co-operation for every wise and good purpose, not only among all the members of the same state, but also among the rulers of those kingdoms and empires whose enmity and

rancour against each other have been carried to the utmost stretch of melancholy folly, and even occasionally to a high degree of madness.

The Establishment of National Seminaries

How can it be that the British Government has never yet introduced a national system of education for the poor? Legislation should be introduced to set up a Government Department to implement this. With sufficient funding it will not only be able to employ the best staff but also to establish seminaries throughout the land in which to train the teachers. The benefits will be mutual, for the State and the people.

At present there are not any individuals in the kingdom who have been trained to instruct the rising generation as it is for the interest and happiness of all that it should be instructed. The training of those who are to form the future man, becomes a consideration of the utmost magnitude; for, on due reflection, it will appear, that instruction to the young must be, of necessity, the only foundation upon which the superstructure of society can be raised.

Labour Demand

Legislation should also be implemented to address the distribution of labour. At a time of national crisis "the British Government, which, with all its errors, is among the best devised and most enlightened that have hitherto been established, makes extravagant and unnecessary waste of [human] labour." Why support "the idle poor"? The regular gathering of statistics, quarterly returns from each district, would ensure a proper assessment of true labour demand. Where "ignorance and idleness" are allowed to continue, crime will be the inevitable result, but "useful and productive employment" will effect otherwise.

All men may, by judicious and proper laws and training, readily acquire knowledge and habits which will enable them, if they be permitted, to produce far more than they need for their support and enjoyment: and thus any population, in the fertile parts of the earth, may be taught to live in plenty and in happiness, without the checks of vice and misery.

Mr Malthus⁹² is, however, correct, when he says that the population of the world is ever adapting itself to the quantity of food raised for its

⁹² Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), English economist and demographer. Ordained in 1797, he published anonymously His *Essay on the Principle of Population as it effects the Future Improvement of Society*, 1798. In this he put forward the theory, which Owen here refutes, that the natural tendency of population is to increase faster than the means of subsistence. Malthus' empirical standpoint, using history as evidence, caused him on the one hand to

support; but he has not told us how much more food an intelligent and industrious people will create from the same soil, than will be produced by one ignorant and ill-governed. It is, however, as one to infinity.

Both earth and sea will cater for the world's growing population as long as man's labours are wisely directed. The working population, when properly trained and directed, will ultimately create employment for themselves and thus no longer be dependent on the rich and powerful. Incentive would be created by higher rates of pay for private labour than for public. The latter would always be in demand.

The most obvious, and, in the first place, the best source, perhaps, of employment, would be the making and repairing of roads. Such employment would be perpetual over the whole kingdom; and it will be found true national economy to keep the public roads at all times in as much higher state of repair than, perhaps, any of them are at present. If requisite, canals, harbours, docks, shipbuilding, and materials for the navy, may be afterwards resorted to: it is not, however, supposed that many of the latter resources would be necessary.

A persevering attention, without which, indeed, not anything beneficial in practice can ever be attained, will soon overcome all the difficulties which may at first appear to obstruct this plan for introducing occasional national employment into the policy of the kingdom.

In times of scarce employment labourers are forced to travel the land in search of work, often with their families and frequently without success. Whole families can thus be rendered, starving, ill-clad and ill-motivated. Application for parish support will then often lead to a loss of self-respect and a sense of degradation from which the desire to "retaliate" naturally proceeds.

Shall we then longer withhold national instruction from our follow-men, who, it has been shown, might easily be trained to be industrious, intelligent, virtuous, and valuable members of the State?

"The measures now proposed are only a compromise with the errors of the present systems", ***but thanks to "the force of reason", "progress" will follow, however slowly, and "success" is assured.***

For such compromises bring truth and error before the public; and whenever they are fairly exhibited together, truth must ultimately prevail.

reject the optimistic doctrines of Rousseau and the French Revolution and on the other to systemise the views of such thinkers as his father's friend, the philosopher and sceptic, David Hume (1711-76).

As many of the inconsistencies of the present system are evident to the most intelligent and well-disposed minds, the way for the public admission of the important truths which have now been in part unfolded seems to be rendered easy; and it is confidently expected that the period is at hand, when man, through ignorance, shall not much longer inflict unnecessary misery on man; because the mass of mankind will become enlightened, and will clearly discern that by so acting they will inevitably create misery to themselves.

Reason is the remedy, but it needs careful application:

All that is now requisite, previous to withdrawing the last mental bandage by which hitherto the human race has been kept in darkness and misery is, by calm and patient reasoning to tranquillize the public mind, and thus prevent the evil effects which otherwise might arise from the too sudden prospect of freely enjoying rational liberty of mind.

To withdraw that bandage without danger, reason must be judiciously applied to lead men of every sect (for all have been in part abused), to reflect that if untold myriads of beings, formed like themselves, have been so grossly deceived as they believe them to have been, what power in nature was there to prevent *them* from being equally deceived?

Such reflections, steadily pursued by those who are anxious to follow the plain and simple path of reason, will soon make it obvious that the inconsistencies which they behold in all other sects *out of their own pale*, are precisely similar to those which all other sects can readily discover *within that pale*.

It is not, however, to be imagined, that this free and open exposure of the gross errors in which the existing generation has been instructed, should be forthwith palatable to the world; it would be contrary to reason to form any such expectations.

Yet, as evil exists, and as a man cannot be rational, nor of course happy, until the cause of it shall be removed; the writer, like a physician who feels the deepest interest in the welfare of his patient, has hitherto administered of this unpalatable restorative the smallest quantity which he deemed sufficient for the purpose. He now waits to see the effects which that may produce.

Should the application not prove of sufficient strength to remove the mental disorder, he promises that it shall be increased, until sound health to the public mind be firmly and permanently established.

Source: R. Owen (1816), *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, with introduction by John Butt, Dent, London, 1972, pp. 14-90. Based on the edition of 1837, the essays have been edited by Alison Hiley for this anthology.