

**‘Knowledge is of little worth for a human being, familiarisation is everything.’**

## 6 On Manners and Other Values

Reliability, thoroughness, perseverance, orderliness, cleanliness, carefulness, love of detail, decency, prudence, conscientiousness, politeness, respect, discipline.

These represent a whole cluster of traditional values and some people might feel very uncomfortable at the thought of them. But the quality of education will not improve until we start living our lives according to them once more.

Naturally a world in which *these* values are the only ones recognised and are imposed by *force* would be a sterile world and therefore repulsive to us. We should put the question the other way round: *Is the state of affairs that arises when these values are neglected acceptable, even desirable?* One only needs to visualise a chaotic world full of disorder, with nothing but unreliable, superficial, impolite and grubby people who have nothing to hold on to and lack even a minimum of decency. Surely no one can seriously want that?

So let me state the obvious: the whole quality of schools will improve if we require both ourselves and the pupils to observe the rules properly, keep to agreed times, do each piece of work with the requisite thoroughness and care, be attentive and polite to each other, keep ourselves and our clothes neat and tidy, and avoid unnecessary and excessive noise. That will give the learning community — that is the class — qualities such as discipline, seriousness, stability, an agreed set of values. As long as we treat everything as of equal value, if not as a matter of indifference, as long as everything is arbitrary, lacking direction, as long as

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any uncontrolled outburst is tolerated — as long as that is the situation we will lack the atmosphere that is conducive to true education.

At this point I hear the first objection: Do creativity, imagination, spontaneity mean nothing to you? And my answer? They mean a lot to me, such a lot, in fact, that I want to create the conditions in which they can be expressed *genuinely, not just for outward show*. I do not accept that people are more creative the greater the disorder and noise surrounding them, the more casual their behaviour towards others and the less they stick to any agreements they have made.

And the second objection follows immediately: Your peace and quiet, your order, reliability, carefulness, punctuality, politeness and thoroughness are just empty forms with no content, imposed on people, mere externals, with no inherent value of their own.

That is a point worth discussing. First of all I will have to go into the twin concepts of form and content, which have occupied philosophers for centuries. ‘Content’ refers to expressions of the creative spirit such as works of art, scientific discoveries, lawmaking, displays of power, playful behaviour, but also to material products. The more farseeing, intuitive, sensitive and creative the mind that produces these contents is, the weightier the products one leaves behind will be.

But we can only deal with these contents because they are all realised in some *form*. ‘Content’ never appears without assuming ‘form’. If we want to explore any content we have to engage with the form. Content without form is inconceivable.

Unfortunately the reverse is not true. Form without content is very conceivable. We see it in everyday life: someone’s manners are perfect but void of meaning, hypocritical; the painting has fluent brushstrokes but when one takes a closer look all they conceal is emptiness; rules are followed, but they do nothing for our lives; the system works, only no one knows what its purpose is; the custom is observed, but the idea behind it has gone; prayers are said, songs sung, maxims quoted, but it’s all empty words.

However contradictory it sounds, the fact is that content seeks form, but forms tend to eat up their content, leaving behind empty shells, which take up excessive space, demonstrate great force of inertia and cut off large areas, drained of meaning, from new life.

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But it is taking our scepticism regarding forms too far to refuse to acknowledge the need for their existence. What we must do is to check how genuine they are, how justified, how necessary and how far they match the content that goes with them. Forms must always be examined to see how adequately they perform their task of 'containing' content. But if we discern a disparity between form and content, rejecting form as such is not the answer. What we are faced with is the choice between two positive, equally valid possibilities: either we return the original content to its form or we look for new forms which will adequately present the desired content. Formlessness is not a solution.

When talking of 'form' and 'content', the duality of 'external' and 'internal' appears almost automatically, although of course it would not be correct to see the two pairs as the same. Nowadays there is a widely held view that externals are only justified when they are founded on something internal, on a person's inner life, on their firm convictions, otherwise the behaviour is a sham. The slogan is: First of all feel thankful, then express your thanks; first of all be in a cheerful mood, then sing your song; first of all be in a peaceable frame of mind, then shake your neighbour by the hand; first of all feel genuine interest, then open the book; first of all believe, then pray or go to church.

I, too, think that this is the ideal way. If we can get our pupils to calm down inside, they will go about their work, their play, their learning calmly; if we can teach our pupils to appreciate the value of keeping their thoughts in order, we will find it easier to keep order in class; if we develop respect for their fellows in our pupils, they will behave politely and considerately towards each other; if we can encourage them to treat objects with care, they will be pleased when they produce a neat and tidy piece of work; if we can open their eyes to the beauty of plants, animals and the countryside, they will protect them and not leave litter lying about; if we can teach them to love the truth, they will be prepared to do everything they undertake thoroughly and conscientiously. It is easy to write these things, but the experienced teacher will also see their illusory aspect.

It is therefore worth asking whether the reverse might not be effective. Does a small child not gradually develop a sense of gratitude from being told simply to say 'thank you' every time it is given a helping

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hand? Do we not learn to order our thoughts when we are trained to keep all our screws, all our pencils, all our books together? Does an appreciation of the aesthetic not develop over time if we are required to write neatly, set out our written work carefully, speak clearly and with expression and to look after our things? Do we not slowly calm down when we simply remain silent for a while? Does our depression not gradually go away when we make an effort and join others in some game? All these cases start out — some perhaps only ostensibly — from the externals and the internal development follows.

Both of these ways are familiar from psychotherapy: depth psychologists hope that the resolution of inner conflicts will lead to changes in behaviour; behavioural therapy works ‘from outside’, on visible behaviours, on what depth psychologists regard as symptoms. While it is true that the proponents of these two theories are at loggerheads, both have successes to show.

And it was in his very first writing on education, the Stans Letter, that Pestalozzi himself recognised, on the basis of his experiences, the particular effectiveness for education of ‘accustoming a child to the mere posture of a virtuous life.’ Thus he wrote, after he had described how he had aroused the children’s sympathy for refugees from the war: *Furthermore, I linked these feelings to exercises in self-control so that they could use them to achieve discipline in their lives. In this respect organised discipline in the institution was not possible. That, too, was to develop step by step as needs became apparent. Quiet as a means of encouraging the children’s activity is perhaps the first secret of such an institution. The quiet I demanded when I was there and teaching was a great help towards achieving my goal, as was the insistence on the physical posture in which they had to sit... Amongst other things I told them, as a joke, to keep their eyes on their big finger when they were repeating what I had said. It is incredible how the insistence on such little details can give the teacher the basis for great ends. No one would believe, unless they had seen it, how a girl that has been allowed to run wild takes a first step on the road of moral development simply by becoming accustomed to holding her body and head straight for hours on end without letting her gaze wander. These experiences have taught me that accustoming a child to the mere posture of a virtuous life can make an immeasurably greater*

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*contribution to the real development of an ability to behave virtuously than any number of lectures and sermons, which do nothing to further this behaviour. Also, by following this principle my children were clearly more serene, calmer, more open to everything that is noble and good than one would have supposed from the complete absence of any concept of goodness in their heads... I explained very little to my children; I taught them neither religion nor morality; but when they were so quiet that you could hear every breath, I asked them, 'Aren't you more sensible and better when you're like this than when you're making a racket?'*

Of course, it would be inappropriate to try and imitate Pestalozzi in any specific detail, since his day our lifestyle has changed considerably in many respects. What is important is the fundamental insight that mind and behaviour, interior and exterior, content and form are in a living relationship and *interact* with each other. It is, therefore, always worth trying both ways: to affect the exterior through the interior and the interior through the exterior.

To illustrate my idea I would like to recount a little episode, which took place while I was teaching:

It is winter, half past seven in the morning and therefore still dark. The sixteen-year-old trainee teachers are sitting in a circle with me and I ask them to start by singing Martin Luther's hymn 'Ev'ry morning, fresh and true/ The Lord outpours His grace anew.' I give the note, bring them in and let the class sing. It's awful. Nothing 'fresh' about it at all, morose rather, at best apathetic, not the least commitment. They just about manage to keep going until the final note. I had foreseen that it would be like that. Then, sitting up straight in my chair and trying to look 'fresh' myself, I said something along the lines of, 'No, not like that. Now would you please all sit up straight, breathe in together, sing loud enough for everyone to hear, think of the words of the hymn and try as hard as you can to sing a cheerful morning song.' Then I brought them in with a flourish, conducted them with gusto, and the hymn rang out such that it was a joy to hear. Then I drew the conclusion I had been aiming at from the start: 'The first time we all sang the way we felt. Who likes to get up this early in winter to go to school? And if they have to, who feels like singing a morning song? If I were to regard our mood as an absolute, I would have to say, we can't help it, our psychological

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state won't let us sing it any other way. But as the example has shown, we could sing it another way thirty seconds later. It is the difference between the first and the second time we sang the hymn that is important, *for that is the precise measure of our freedom.*'

Let us return to the values I mentioned at the start of this chapter. Each of them lays an obligation on us — both teachers and pupils — but they also give us a certain measure of freedom, which depends on our understanding and our good will. If we neglect these values, learning will suffer. The pupils as well as the teacher will expend much too much energy on things that have nothing to do with the topic, for problems and conflicts will constantly arise. If the attitudes and behaviour associated with these values are imposed by force, are mere external form that is, then something is wrong. But if one abandons them because of that, things are even more wrong. The only possible solution is to make them a permanent part of one's teaching, to try and fill them with content, with life, by one's own example and, of course, by discussion and exhortation as well. Then they will no longer be mere externals, void of meaning, but an expression of true humanity and contribute to an atmosphere in which committed, fruitful learning can take place.