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The Long and Winding Road from Locke to Rousseau

Philosophers mulling over questions of human potential and improvement have long found pedagogical philosophy appealing and have argued that education represents the best chance to reform society. This was especially true of the French Enlightenment. Inspired largely by the writing of John Locke, eighteenth-century French philosophers picked up the educational banner with great enthusiasm. This cross-channel dynamic is undoubtedly familiar to many, especially in the form of the intellectual relationship between Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, author of the wildly popular educational novel *Emile* (1762). Although readers might feel comfortable with their knowledge of the subject, Natasha Gill's recent book, *Educational Philosophy in the French Enlightenment* (2010), revisits the topic in rich detail and shows that historians who skip from Locke to Rousseau miss much of the story.

Gill's book is focused on French pedagogical debates, but she makes clear that these debates had ramifications far beyond France. She describes education as an "intellectual laboratory" of the Enlightenment, which she defines as a series of thought experiments (pp. 1, 16-17). Writing about education, she argues, was a way for the *philosophes* to articulate their views on human intelligence, argue about the nature of genius and the possibilities of perfectibility, and ponder the direction of social reforms. These thought experiments were thus hardly fringe debates. Instead, they reveal much about the methods, priorities, and unspoken assumptions of Enlightenment thinkers in general.

Gill opens the book with a clear and thorough reading of Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). Although many of these ideas are familiar–that human beings are born without innate ideas and are shaped by their sensations–Gill does a masterful job explaining Locke's views on the transformative power of education. Education could strengthen the mind and make the student more virtuous, but it should also strengthen the body and make it more capable of withstanding cold and discomfort. Gill nevertheless stresses that Locke's vision of human beings as blank slates did not mean that educators had total control over their students. Instead, he saw human nature as somewhat fixed: children had unique personalities and temperaments that education could not change. Gill ends her discussion of Locke by highlighting two themes that she explores in the rest of the book. The first is the tension between nature (the way that human beings are born) and second nature (habits that become so engrained that they feel natural). The second theme is the paradox of liberal education: attempting to form a free and self-directed individual through rigorous conditioning.

Although Locke's essay was modest in scope, other educational theorists proved eager to adapt and apply his theories. Gill argues that French pedagogues are of particular importance for understanding the dissemination and practice of Locke's educational ideas because education was a topic of intense debate in France in the first half of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, these reforms became newly conceivable after 1762, the year the monarch expelled the Jesuits (who had been France's premier educators). Gill studies a wide range of thinkers and breaks them into chronologically organized groups.

She first discusses early Enlightenment thinkers, in-

cluding Claude Fleury, Charles Rollin, and Jean-Pierre de Crousaz; these writers will be much less familiar than Locke, even to specialists. These thinkers shared many of Locke's ideas about the malleability of the mind, the importance of child-based education, and the naturalness of sociability, and they thus show how quickly new pedagogical theories took root in France. Gill follows this examination by considering a mid-century thinker, Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, whom she identifies as an innovative but oft-ignored philosophe. By devoting over one hundred pages of her book to these thinkers, Gill makes clear that thinkers debated childhood and education long before Rousseau. Hence, although "Rousseau's *Emile* is still frequently credited … for having discovered or 'rediscovered childhood,' … in fact, however, Rousseau's work represents the *culmination*, rather than the origins, of this process" (p. 74). Many of Rousseau's most famous–and most paradoxical–ideas predated him, even if he was loath to acknowledge his debts to other philosophers (p. 225)

Having established that Rousseau was part of a much longer intellectual tradition than scholars usually assume, Gill then discusses *l'ami* Jean-Jacques himself. She examines Rousseau's pedagogical philosophy from multiple perspectives in a series of chapters: his disagreements with the radically egalitarian Helvétius, who insisted that the right education could make a genius of anyone; Rousseau's famed novel *Emile*; and *Emile's* less famous sequel, *Emile et Sophie* (1780), where it is revealed that Emile and Sophie suffered a variety of hardships and betrayals despite their nature-based educations. As was the case with the chapters on Locke, this material will be largely familiar to specialists (with the exception of *Emile et Sophie*) but Gill presents Rousseau's ideas succinctly and engagingly. She then concludes the book with a survey of proposals entertained in the wake of the expulsion of the Jesuits, particularly meditating on how the tensions highlighted throughout the book reached their apogee.

Gill's examination of these pedagogical theorists is careful and sophisticated: I cannot do justice to her careful analysis within the confines of a review. By studying a panoply of education writings, she demonstrates that educational philosophy cannot be reduced to the ideas of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Gill's work, like other recent texts, also makes clear that Enlightenment was a series of disagreements, debates, and contradictions–sometimes productively so, sometimes not.

One of the central tensions that Gill identifies in this body of work is the tension between "nature" and "second nature." Was the goal of education to simply polish a student's inner nature, to bring out his or her natural goodness? Or was the goal to design a system of education so thorough and so rigorous that the child would internalize the teacher's goals to the point that they became "second nature"? In other words, was virtue innate, or was it the result of "externally conditioning" (p. 137)? This is a useful way to approach Enlightenment fixations with imitating and/or improving nature.

Although the book is an excellent survey of pedagogical literature, a general problem is that Gill does not engage with Enlightenment scholarship more broadly. References to huge topics frequently merit just one citation. In the case of education and the French Revolution, references simply point to David Bell's excellent but hardly isolated *Cult of the Nation* (2003) (pp. 87, 262 n. 20, 262 n. 24). In some cases, this lack of engagement obscures the broader significance of the argument.

For example, in discussing nature versus second nature, this study relates to–although it does not explicitly engage with–recent studies of experiments designed to recast human nature, such as the work of Julia Douthwaite, Michael Winston, and Sean Quinlan.[1] It is unfortunate that Gill does not address this scholarship, because these scholars have somewhat divergent interpretations of malleability and human nature. In Douthwaite's book, the subject of which is "dangerous experiments," she shows that many philosophes believed-with a disastrous level of confidence–that human nature was endlessly perfectible. They stubbornly adhered to this belief despite their failures to transform children–"wild" or otherwise–into perfect Enlightenment specimens. Quinlan, by contrast, has argued that many philosophes considered human nature to be far less malleable.[2] Gill could usefully contribute to this debate, but she leaves that work to the reader.

Gill's discussion of changing perceptions of teachers represents another missed opportunity. She argues that over the course of the eighteenth century, more and more philosophers worried about the potentially deleterious effect that bad teachers might have on students. As a solution, they envisioned a world in which teachers would not have the opportunity to spoil children. They reimagined teachers as mere automatons who did the bidding of national politicians and philosophers; some philosophes even argued that teachers could be replaced by standardized textbooks. Gill might have considered

other eighteenth-century iterations of this idea. Historians of science have found many other attempts to redefine human intelligence and to downgrade certain activities, even those once considered the work of skilled and intelligent individuals, to be the work of barely cognizant automatons and amanuenses. Mathematical calculation, once an example of reason and intelligence, was redefined at the end of the eighteenth century as drudge work far beneath talented mathematical geniuses; instead, it became the province of human computers–often women–who were described as akin to machines. This process was part of the broader institutionalization, professionalization, and masculinization of science.[3] Addressing this literature would have enabled Gill to make a broader point about the definition of intelligence in the Age of Enlightenment and to discuss the social context of pedagogical reform. Was this also a symptom of institutionalization and professionalization? Was there a gender or class dimension to the mechanization of teaching, as there often was with human computers?

These are just a few suggestions as to how Gill might have widened her focus. Others might include comparing French pedagogues with their counterparts in Britain and elsewhere, or elucidating the differences between male and female educational theorists (whom the book considers only occasionally). But these critiques–variations on the theme that Gill's argument could speak to a number of Enlightenment debates but does not engage with the relevant scholarship–demonstrate how how usefully suggestive the book can be.

The greatest strength and the greatest weakness of Gill's book are thus the same: its narrow focus. Homing in on the particulars of education debates in France enables her to recognize connections and contradictions that are overlooked in broader studies, yet that same focus leads her to ignore the connections between education and other Enlightenment debates. Therefore, the book will most appeal to readers looking for a detailed analysis of education. Although it is not a stand-alone book on the Enlightenment, it offers insight into one of the most significant arenas of Enlightenment thought. It will help orient scholars in the field if they are unfamiliar with the varied assortment of pedagogical writing or if they have only read the most famous works, such as *Emile*.

In conclusion, then, this is a book of many merits. It is a lucid and nuanced take on pedagogy in Enlightenment France and it leads the reader down the long and meandering path from Locke to Rousseau and beyond. Although the book's narrow focus might deter some readers, there is much to be learned–even for specialists–from a careful reading. British historians could benefit from seeing the impact of English philosophical thought, or at least the thought of John Locke, in France. Enlightenment historians will benefit from the careful study of educational philosophy in all of its rich complexity. Graduate students could find the book a useful introduction to the Enlightenment and to education debates.

Notes

[1]. Julia Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michael Winston, *From Perfectibility to Perversion: Meliorism in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Sean Quinlan, *The Great Nation in Decline: Sex, Modernity, and Health Crises in Revolutionary France, ca. 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[2]. Sean Quinlan, "Inheriting Vice, Acquiring Virtue: Hereditary Disease and Moral Hygiene in Eighteenth-Century France," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 80 (Winter 2006).

[3]. Steven Shapin, "The Invisible Technician," *American Scientist* 77 (1989): 554-563; Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? : Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Jessica Riskin, "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 629-631; Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); and Lorraine Daston, "Enlightenment Calculations," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 182-202.

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