Abstract

There is a curious moment in Locke's Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693) when he turns to the question of what discourses on ethics a young English gentleman in the making should be encouraged to read. This is a question of some importance, one would have thought, in a treatise whose stated goal is an education to virtue and service to one's country, especially given Locke's claim that education "is that which makes the great difference in mankind." "... of all the men we meet with," he says, "nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (§1). But the brevity of his treatment here — earlier in the treatise he has spent at least ten times as long on proper methods of toilet training and five times as long on the question of whether children should be allowed to eat melons and plums or apples and pears — as well as the brevity of his actual reading list, occasion some surprise. Indeed, Locke explicitly recommends reading just two books in the sphere of morality: The knowledge of virtue, all along from the beginning, in all the instances he is capable of, being taught him, more by practice than rules; and the love of reputation, instead of satisfying his appetite, being made habitual in him; I know not whether he should read any other discourses of morality, but what he finds in the Bible; or have any system of ethics put into his hand, till he can read Tully's Offices, not as a school-boy to learn Latin, but as one who would be informed in the principles and precepts of virtue, for the conduct of his life.
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