

Against Reasoning with Children

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Emile: Book II

To reason with children was Locke's great maxim. It is the one most in vogue today. Its success, however, does not appear to me such as to establish its reputation; and, as for me, I see nothing more stupid than these children who have been reasoned with so much. Of all the faculties of man, reason, which is, so to speak, only a composite of all the others, is the one that develops with the most difficulty and latest. And it is this one which they want to use in order to develop the first faculties! The masterpiece of a good education is to make a reasonable man, and they claim they raise a child by reason! This is to begin with the end, to want to make the product the instrument. If children understood reason, they would not need to be raised. But by speaking to them from an early age a language which they do not understand, one accustoms them to show off with words, to control all that is said to them, to believe themselves as wise as their masters, to become disputatious and rebellious; and everything that is thought to be gotten from them out of reasonable motives is never obtained other than out of motives of

covetousness or fear or vanity which are always perforce joined to the others.

This is the formula to which all the lessons in morality that are given, and can be given, to children can just about be reduced:

MASTER: You must not do that.

CHILD: And why must I not do it?

MASTER: Because it is bad to do.

CHILD: Bad to do! What is bad to do?

MASTER: What you are forbidden to do.

CHILD: What is bad about doing what I am forbidden to do?

MASTER: You are punished for having disobeyed.

CHILD: I shall fix it so that nothing is known about it.

MASTER: You will be spied on.

CHILD: I shall hide.

MASTER: You will be questioned.

CHILD: I shall lie.

MASTER: You must not lie.

CHILD: Why must I not lie?

MASTER: Because it is bad to do, etc.

This is the inevitable circle. Get out of it, and the child does not understand you any longer. Is this not

most useful instruction? I would be quite curious to know what could be put in the place of this dialogue. Locke himself would certainly have been very much at a loss. To know good and bad, to sense the reason for man's duties, is not a child's affair.

Nature wants children to be children before being men. If we want to pervert this order, we shall produce precocious fruits which will be immature and insipid and will not be long in rotting. We shall have young doctors¹ and old children. Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs, and I would like as little to insist that a ten-year-old be five feet tall as that he possess judgment. Actually, what would reason do for him at that age? It is the bridle of strength, and the child does not need this bridle.

In trying to persuade your pupils of the duty of obedience, you join to this alleged persuasion force and threats or, what is worse, flattery and promises. In this way, therefore, lured by profit or constrained by force, they pretend to be convinced by reason. They see quite well that obedience is advantageous to them and rebellion harmful when you notice either. But since everything you insist on is unpleasant and, further, it is always irksome to do another's will, they arrange to do their own will covertly. They are persuaded that what they

do is right if their disobedience is unknown, but are ready on being caught — in order to avoid a worse evil — to admit that what they do is wrong. Since the reason for duty cannot be grasped at their age, there is not a man in the world who could succeed in giving duty a truly palpable sense for them. But the fear of punishment, the hope of pardon, importunity, awkwardness in answering, wrest all the confessions from them that are demanded; and it is believed that they have been convinced when they have only been pestered or intimidated.

What results from this? Firstly, by imposing on them a duty they do not feel, you set them against your tyranny and turn them away from loving you. Secondly, you teach them to become dissemblers, fakers, and liars in order to extort rewards or escape punishments. Finally, by accustoming them always to cover a secret motive with an apparent motive, you yourselves give them the means of deceiving you ceaselessly, of depriving you of the knowledge of their true character, and of fobbing you and others off with vain words when the occasion serves. Laws, you will say, although they obligate conscience, nevertheless also use constraint with grown men. I admit it, but what are these men if not children spoiled by education? This is precisely what must be prevented. Use force with children, and reason with men. Such is the natural order.

Note

1. In the original sense of *learned* man.