

***CHARLOTTE  
PERKINS GILMAN***



***CONCERNING  
CHILDREN***

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**Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

# **Concerning Children**

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# I.

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## THE PRECIOUS TEN.

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According to our religious belief, the last best work of God is the human race. According to the observation of biologists, the highest product of evolution is the human race. According to our own natural inner conviction, this twofold testimony is quite acceptable: we are the first class.

Whatever our merits when compared with lower species, however, we vary conspicuously when compared with one another. Humanity is superior to equinity, felinity, caninity; but there are degrees of humanness.

Between existing nations there is marked difference in the qualities we call human; and history shows us a long line of advance in these qualities in the same nation. The human race is still in the making, is by no means done; and, however noble it is to be human, it will be nobler to be humaner. As conscious beings, able to modify our own acts, we have power to improve the species, to promote the development of the human race. This brings us to the children. Individuals may improve more or less at any time, though most largely and easily in youth; but race improvement must be made in youth, to be transmitted. The real progress of man is born in him.

If you were buying babies, investing in young human stock as you would in colts or calves, for the value of the beast, a sturdy English baby would be worth more than an

equally vigorous young Fuegian. With the same training and care, you could develop higher faculties in the English specimen than in the Fuegian specimen, because it was better bred. The savage baby would excel in some points, but the qualities of the modern baby are those dominant today. Education can do much; but the body and brain the child is born with are all that you have to educate. The progress of humanity must be recorded in living flesh. Unless the child is a more advanced specimen than his father and mother, there is no racial improvement. Virtues we still strive for are not yet ours: it is the unconscious virtues we are born with that measure the rise of nations.

Our mechanical products in all their rich variety serve two purposes,—to show the measure of the brains that made them, and to help make better ones.

The printing-press, for instance, marked a century of ability; but its main value is to develop centuries of greater ability. Society secretes, as it were, this mass of material wherewith to nourish its countless young; and, as this material is so permanent and so mobile, it is proportionately more advantageous to our posterity than the careful preparation of some anxious insect for her swarm of progeny. Unless the creature is born better than his creators, they do not save him. He sinks back or is overcome by others, perhaps lingering decadent among the traces of lost arts, like degenerate nomad savages who wander among the ruins of ancestral temples. We see plenty of such cases, individually, showing this arrested social development,—from the eighteenth-century man, who is only a little behind his age and does not hinder us

much, to the dragging masses of dull peasantry and crude savagery, which keep us back so seriously. This does not include the reversions and degenerates, the absolutely abortive members of society; but merely its raw stock, that heavy proportion of the people who are not bred up to the standard of the age. To such we may apply every advantage of education, every facile convenience of the latest day; and, though these things do help a little, we have still the slow-minded mass, whose limited range of faculties acts as a steady check on the success of our best intellects. The surest, quickest way to improve humanity is to improve the stock, the people themselves; and all experience shows that the time to improve people is while they are young. As in a growing cornstalk the height is to be measured from joint to joint, not counting the length of its long, down-flowing leaves, so in our line of ascent the height is to be measured from birth to birth, not counting the further development of the parent after the child is born.

The continued life of the parent counts in other ways, as it contributes to social service; and, in especial, as it reacts to promote the further growth of the young. But the best service to society and the child is in the progress made by the individual before parentage, for that progress is born into the race. Between birth and birth is the race bred upward. Suppose we wish to improve a race of low savages, and we carefully select the parents, subjecting them to the most elaborate educational influences, till they are all dead. Then we return, and take a fresh set of parents to place under these advantageous conditions, leaving the children always to grow up in untouched savagery. This might be



done for many generations, and we should always have the same kind of savages to labour with, what improvement was made being buried with each set of parents. Now, on the other hand, let us take the children of the tribe, subject them to the most advantageous conditions, and, when they become parents, discontinue our efforts on that generation and begin on the next. What gain was made in this case would be incorporated in the stock; we should have gradually improving relays of children.

So far as environment is to really develop the race, that development must be made before the birth of the next generation.

If a young man and woman are clean, healthy, vigorous, and virtuous before parenthood, they may become dirty, sickly, weak, and wicked afterward with far less ill effect to the race than if they were sick and vicious before their children were born, and thereafter became stalwart saints. The sowing of wild oats would be far less harmful if sowed in the autumn instead of in the spring.

Human beings are said to have a longer period of immaturity than other animals; but it is not prolonged childhood which distinguishes us so much as prolonged parenthood. In early forms of life the parent promptly dies after having reproduced the species. He is of no further use to the race, and therefore his life is discontinued. In the evolution of species, as the parent becomes more and more able to benefit the young, he is retained longer in office; and in humanity, as it develops, we see an increasing prolongation of parental usefulness. The reactive value of the adult upon the young is very great, covering our whole

range of conscious education; but the real worth of that education is in its effects on the young before they become parents, that the training and improvement may become ours by birth, an inbred racial progress.

It may be well here to consider the objections raised by the Weissman theory that "acquired traits are not transmissible." To those who believe this it seems useless to try to improve a race by development of the young with a view to transmission. They hold that the child inherits a certain group of faculties, differing from the parents perhaps through the "tendency to vary," and that, although you may improve the individual indefinitely through education, that improvement is not transmissible to his offspring. The original faculties may be transmitted, but not the individual modification. Thus they would hold that, if two brothers inherited the same kind and amount of brain power, and one brother was submitted to the finest educational environment, while the other was entirely neglected, yet the children of the two brothers would inherit the same amount of brain development: the training and exercise which so visibly improved the brain of the educated brother would be lost to his children.

Or, if two brothers inherited the same physical constitution, and one developed and improved it by judicious care and exercise, while the other wasted strength and contracted disease, the children of either would inherit the original constitutional tendencies of the parent, unaffected by that parent's previous career.

This would mean that the whole tremendous march of race-modification has been made under no other influence

than the tendency to vary, and that individual modification in no way affects the race.

Successive generations of individuals may be affected by the cumulative pressure of progress, but not the race itself. Under this view the Fuegian baby would be as valuable an investment as the English baby, unless, indeed, successive and singularly connected tendencies to vary had worked long upon the English stock and peculiarly neglected the Fuegian. In proof of this claim that "acquired traits are not transmissible," an overwhelming series of experiments are presented, as wherein many consecutive generations of peaceful guinea pigs are mutilated in precisely the same way, and, lo! the last guinea pig is born as four-legged and symmetrically-featured as the first.

If it had been so arranged that the crippled guinea pigs obtained some advantage because of their injuries, they might have thus become "fittest"; and the "tendency to vary" would perhaps have launched out a cripple somewhere, and so evolved a triumphant line of three-legged guinea pigs.

But, as proven by these carefully conducted scientific experiments, it does not "modify the species" at all to cut off its legs,—not in a score of generations. It modifies the immediate pig, of course, and is doubtless unpleasant to him; but the effect is lost with his death.

It has always seemed to me that there was a large difference between a mutilation and an acquired trait. An acquired trait is something that one uses and develops, not something one has lost.

The children of a soldier are supposed to inherit something of his courage and his habit of obedience, not his wooden leg.

The dwindled feet of the Chinese ladies are not transmitted; but the Chinese habits are. The individual is most modified by what he does, not by what is done to him; and so is the race.

Let a new experiment be performed on the long-suffering guinea pig. Take two flourishing pair of the same family (fortunately, the tendency to vary appears to be but slight in guinea pigs, so there is not serious trouble from that source), and let one pair of guinea pigs be lodged in a small but comfortable cage, and fed and fed and fed,—not to excess, but so as to supply all guinea-piggian desires as soon as felt,—them and their descendants in their unnumbered generations. Let the other pair be started on a long, slow, cautious, delicate but inexorable system of exercise, not exercise involving any advantage, with careful mating of the most lively,—for this would be claimed as showing only the "tendency to vary" and "survival of the fittest,"—but exercise forced upon the unwilling piggies to no profit whatever.

A wheel, such as mitigates the captivity of the nimble squirrel, should be applied to these reluctant victims; a well-selected, stimulating diet given at slowly increasing intervals; and the physical inequalities of their abode become greater, so that the unhappy subjects of scientific research would find themselves skipping ever faster and farther from day to day.

If, after many generations of such training, the descendants of these cultivated guinea pigs could not outrun the descendants of the plump and puffy cage-fed pair, the Weissman theory would be more strongly reinforced than by all the evidence of his suffering cripples. Meanwhile the parent and teacher in general is not greatly concerned about theories of pan-genesis or germ-plasm. He knows that, "as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined," and that, if the fathers have eaten sour grapes, the children's teeth are pretty certain to be set on edge.

Inherit we must to some degree; and whatever comes to us by that method must belong to the parent before he is a parent. Traits acquired after parentage are certainly not transmissible, whatever may be the case before. Our inherited constitution, temper, character, tendency, is like an entailed estate. It is in the family, belongs to the family in succession, not to the individual. It is "owned" by the individual in usufruct, but cannot be sold, given away, or otherwise alienated. It must be handed on to the next heir, somewhat better or worse, perhaps, for the current ownership. When the new heir takes possession of his estate, he confers with the steward, and becomes thoroughly acquainted with his holdings. Here are the assets,—this much in permanent capital, this much in income, which he may use as he will. It would be possible for him to overspend that income, to cut down the timber and sell it, to incur debts, impoverishing the next heir. Perhaps this has been done; and he finds himself with neglected lands, buildings in disrepair, restricted resources, and heavy debts. In such case the duty of the heir is to live

carefully, avoiding every extravagance, and devote all he can save to clearing off the encumbrances on the estate, thus handing it on to the next heir in better shape than he received it. If this is not done, if one generation after another of inheritors draws relentlessly on the burdened estate and adds to its encumbrances, there comes a time when the heavy mortgages are foreclosed, and that estate is lost.

So with the human constitution. We inherit such and such powers and faculties; such and such weaknesses, faults, tendencies to disease. Our income is the available strength we have to spare without drawing on our capital. Perhaps our ancestors have overdrawn already, wasting their nerve force, injuring their organisms, handing down to us an impoverished physique, with scarce income enough for running expenses, yet needing a large sinking fund for repairs.

In this case it is our plain duty to live "within our means" in nerve force, however limited, and to devote all we can spare to building up the constitution, that we may transmit it in an improved condition to the next heir. If we do not do this, if successive generations overdraw their strength, neglect necessary rest and recreation, increase their weaknesses and diseases, then there comes a time when the inexorable creditor called Nature forecloses the mortgage, and that family is extinct. The heir of the entailed estate in lands and houses has an advantage over the heir of blood and brain. He does not transmit his property until he dies. He has a lifetime to make the needed improvements. But the inheritor of poor eyesight, weak

lungs, and a bad temper has a shorter period for repairs. If a woman, she is likely to become a mother by the time she is twenty-five,—perhaps sooner; the man, a father by thirty.

Taking the very early marriages of the poor into consideration (and they are a heavy majority of the population), we may take twenty-five as the average beginning of parenthood. Of course there is still room for improvement before the later children appear; but the running expenses increase so heavily that there is but a small margin to be given to repairs. The amount of nerve force hitherto set aside to control the irritable temper will now be drawn upon by many new demands: the time given to special exercises for the good of the lungs will now be otherwise used. However good the intentions afterward, the best period for self-improvement is before the children come. This reduces the time in which to develop humanity's inheritance to twenty-five years. Twenty-five years is not much at best; and that time is further limited, as far as individual responsibility goes, by subtracting the period of childhood. The first, say, fifteen years of our lives are comparatively irresponsible. We have not the judgment or the self-control to meddle with our own lives to any advantage; nor is it desirable that we should. Unconscious growth is best; and the desired improvement during this period should be made by the skilful educator without the child's knowledge. But at about fifteen the individual comes to a keen new consciousness of personal responsibility.

That fresh, unwarped sense of human honour, the race-enthusiasm of the young; and the fund of strength they bear with them; together with the very light expenses of this

period, all the heavy drains of life being met by the parent,—these conditions make that short ten years the most important decade of a lifetime.

It is no wonder that we worship youth. On it depends more than on the most care-burdened age. It is one of the many follies of our blundering progression that we have for so long supposed that the value of this period lay merely in its enjoyableness. With fresh sensations and new strength, with care, labour, and pain largely kept away, youth naturally enjoys more heartily than age, and has less to suffer; but these are only incidental conditions. Every period has its advantage and accompanying responsibilities. This blessed time of youth is not ours to riot through in cheerful disregard of human duty. The biological advantage of a longer period of immaturity is in its cumulative value to the race, the older parent having more development to transmit.

The human animal becomes adult comparatively early,—that is, becomes capable of reproducing the species; and in states of low social grade he promptly sets about it.

But the human being is not only an individual animal: he is a social constituent. He may be early ready to replace himself by another man as good, but he is not yet able to improve upon the past and give the world a man much better. He is not yet developed as a member of society,—trained in those special lines which make him not only a healthier, stronger, rounder individual, but a more highly efficient member of society. Our people to-day are not only larger and longer-lived than earlier races, but they are



capable of social relations immeasurably higher than those open to a never-so-healthy savage.

The savage as an individual animal may be equal—in some ways superior—to the modern man; but, as a social constituent, he is like a grain of sand in a heap compared to some exquisitely fitted part of an intricate machine,—a living machine, an organism. In this social relation man may grow and develop all his life; and that is why civilisation, socialisation, brings us useful and honourable age, while savagery knocks its old folk on the head.

But while the social structure grows in beauty, refinement, and power, and eighty years may be spent in its glorious service, that service must be given by individuals. Unless these individuals improve from age to age, showing a finer, subtler, stronger brain and unimpaired physique, there can be no genuine or enduring social improvement. We have seen repeatedly in history a social status lodged in comparatively few individuals, a narrow fragile upper-class civilisation; and we have seen it always fall,—fall to the level of its main constituents, the mass of the people.

One per cent. of sane men in a society of lunatics would make but a foolish state; one per cent. of good men in a society of criminals would make a low grade of virtue; one per cent. of rich men in a society of poor peasants does not make a rich community. A society is composed of the people who compose it, strange to say,—all of them; and, as they are, it is. The people must be steadily made better if the world is to move. The way to make people better is to have them born better. The way to have them born better is to make all possible improvement in the individual before

parentage. That is why youth is holy and august: it is the fountain of human progress. Not only that "the child is father to the man," but the child is father to the state—and mother.

The first fifteen years of a child's life should be treated with a view to developing the power of "judgment" and "will," that he may be able to spend his precious ten in making the best possible growth. A boy of fifteen is quite old enough to understand the main principles of right living, and to follow them. A girl of fifteen is quite old enough to see the splendid possibilities that lie before her, both in her individual service to society and the almost limitless power of motherhood. It is not youth which makes our boys and girls so foolish in their behaviour. It is the kind of training we give the little child, keeping back the most valuable faculties of the brain instead of helping them to grow. A boy cast out upon the street to work soon manifests both the abilities and vices of an older person. A girl reared in a frivolous and artificial society becomes a practising coquette while yet a child. These conditions are bad, and we do not wish to parallel them by producing a morbidly self-conscious and prematurely aged set of youngsters. But, if the child has been trained in reason and self-control,—not forced, but allowed to grow in the natural use of these qualities,—he will be used to exercising them when he reaches the freer period of youth, and not find it so difficult to be wise. It is natural for a child to reason, and the power grows with encouragement and use. It is natural for a child to delight in the exercise of his own will upon himself in learning to "do things."

The facility and pleasure and strong self-control shown by a child in playing some arbitrary game prove that it is quite natural for him to govern his acts to a desired end, and enjoy it.

To a desired end, however. We have not yet succeeded in enlisting the child's desires to help his efforts. We rather convince him that being good is tedious and unprofitable, often poignantly disagreeable; and, when he passes childhood, he is hampered with this unfortunate misbelief of our instilling.

But, with a healthy brain and will, a youth of fifteen, with the knowledge easily available at that age, should be not only able and willing, but gloriously eager for personal development. It is an age of soaring ambition; and that ambition, directed in lines of real improvement, is one of Nature's loveliest and strongest forces to lift mankind.

There is a splendid wealth of aspiration in youth, a pure and haughty desire for the very highest, which ought to be playing into the current of our racial life and lifting it higher and higher with each new generation.

The love of emulation, too, so hurtful in the cheap, false forms it so often takes, is a beautiful force when turned to self-improvement. We underrate the power of good intention of our young people. We check and irritate them all through childhood, confusing and depressing the upward tendencies; and then wag our aged heads pityingly over "the follies of youth."

There is wisdom in youth, and power, if we would but let it grow. A simple unconscious childhood, shooting upward fast and strong along lines of rational improving growth,

would give to the opening consciousness of youth a healthy background of orderly achievement, and a glorious foreground,—the limitless front of human progress. Such young people, easily appreciating what could be done for themselves and the world by right living, would pour their rich enthusiasm and unstrained powers into real human growing,—the growing that can be done so well in that short, wonderful ten years,—that must be done then, if the race is to be born better. Three or four generations of such growth would do more for man's improvement than our present methods of humaniculture accomplish in as many centuries.

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## II.

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# THE EFFECT OF MINDING ON THE MIND.

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Obedience, we are told, is a virtue. This seems simple and conclusive, but on examination further questions rise.

What is "a virtue"?

What is "obedience"?

And, if a virtue, is it always and equally so?

"There is a time when patience ceases to be a virtue." Perhaps obedience has its limits, too.

A virtue is a specific quality of anything, as the virtue of mustard is in its biting quality; of glass, transparency; of a sword, its edge and temper. In moral application a virtue is a

quality in mankind whereby we are most advantaged. We make a distinction in our specific qualities, claiming some to be good and some bad; and the virtues are those whereby we gain the highest good. These virtues of humanity change in relative value with time, place, and circumstance. What is considered a virtue in primitive life becomes foolishness or even vice in later civilisation; yet each age and place can show clear reason for its virtues, trace their introduction, rise into high honour, and gradual neglect.

For instance, the virtue of endurance ranks high among savages. To be able to bear hunger and heat and cold and pain and dire fatigue,—this power is supreme virtue to the savage, for the simple reason that it is supremely necessary to him. He has a large chance of meeting these afflictions all through life, and wisely prepares himself beforehand by wilfully undergoing even worse hardships.

Chastity is a comparatively modern virtue, still but partially accepted. Even as an ideal, it is not universally admired, being considered mainly as a feminine distinction. This is good proof of its gradual introduction,—first, as solely female, a demand from the man, and then proving its value as a racial virtue, and rising slowly in general esteem, until to-day there is a very marked movement toward a higher standard of masculine chastity.

Courage, on the other hand, has been held almost wholly as a masculine virtue, from the same simple causes of sociological development; to this day one hears otherwise intelligent and respectable women own themselves, without the slightest sense of shame, to be cowards.

A comparative study of the virtues would reveal a mixed and changeful throng, and always through them all the underlying force of necessity, which makes this or that quality a virtue in its time.

We speak of "making a virtue of necessity." As a matter of fact, all virtues are made of necessity.

A virtue, then, in the human race is that quality which is held supremely beneficial, valuable, necessary, at that time. And what, in close analysis, is obedience? It is a noun made from the verb "to obey."

What is it to obey? It is to act under the impulse of another will,—to submit one's behaviour to outside direction.

It involves the surrender of both judgment and will. Is this capacity of submission of sufficient value to the human race to be called a virtue? Assuredly it is—sometimes. The most familiar instance of the uses of obedience is among soldiers and sailors, always promptly adduced by the stanch upholders of this quality.

They do not speak of it as particularly desirable among farmers or merchants or artists, but cling to the battlefield or the deck, as sufficient illustrations. We may note, also, that, when our elaborate efforts are made to inculcate its value to young children, we always introduce a railroad accident, runaway, fire, burglar, or other element of danger; and, equally, in the stories of young animals designed for the same purpose, the disobedient little beast is always exposed to dire peril, and the obedient saved.

All this clearly indicates the real basis of our respect for obedience.

Its first and greatest use is this: where concerted action is necessary, in such instant performance that it would be impossible to transmit the impulse through a number of varying intelligences.

That is why the soldier and sailor have to obey. Military and nautical action is essentially collective, essentially instant, and too intricate for that easy understanding which would allow of swift common action on individual initiative. Under such circumstances, obedience is, indeed, a virtue, and disobedience the unpardonable sin.

Again, with the animals, we have a case where it is essential that the young should act instantly under stimuli perceptible to the mother and not to the young. No explanation is possible. There is not speech for it, even if there were time. A sudden silent danger needs a sudden silent escape. Under this pressure of condition has been evolved a degree of obedience absolutely instinctive and automatic, as so beautifully shown in Mr. Thompson's story of the little partridges flattening themselves into effacement on their mother's warning signal.

With deadly peril at hand, with no brain to give or to receive explanation, with no time to do more than squeak an inarticulate command, there is indeed need for obedience; and obedience is forthcoming. But is this so essential quality in rearing young animals as essential in human education? So far in human history, our absolute desideratum in child-training is that the child shall obey. The child who "minds" promptly and unquestioningly is the ideal: the child who refuses to mind, who, perhaps, even says, "I won't," is the example of all evil.