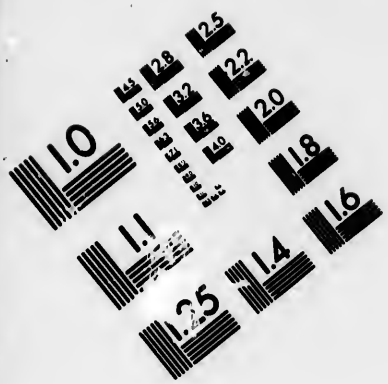

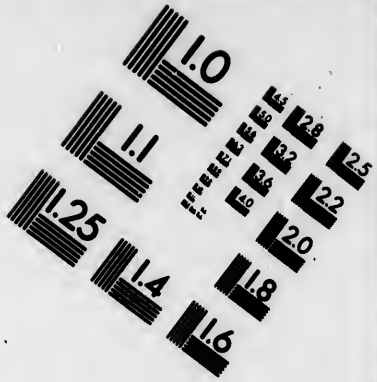

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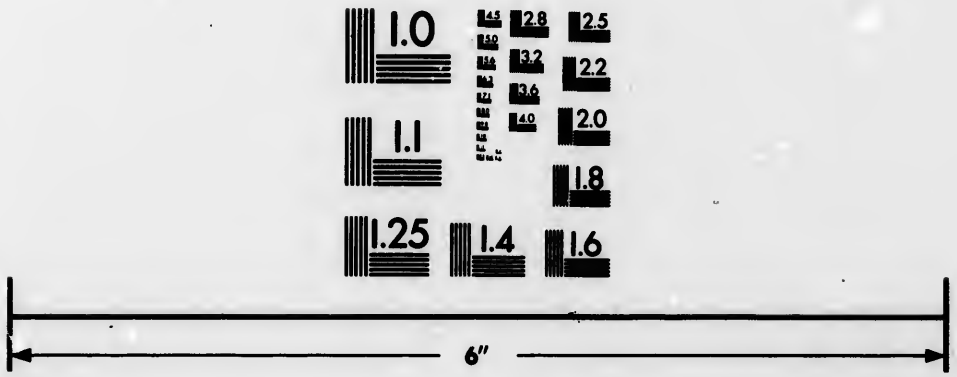

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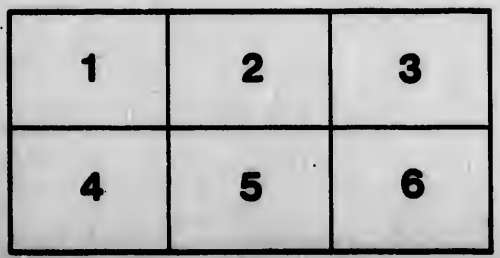

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION:

A LECTURE

DELIVERED AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE SCHOLASTIC YEAR OF ST. FRANCIS XAVIER'S COLLEGE, ANTIGONISH, AUGUST 7th, 1860,

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BY THE REV. RONALD McDONALD,
Professor of Latin and Greek in the same Institute.

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ELEMENTARY EDUCATION.

My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen :—

No subject has, of late years, more agitated the public mind than Education. The discrepancy of opinions, that exist regarding the means by which education is to be promoted, has made this question one of party and religious consideration. As nothing could be more injurious to the furtherance of any measure appertaining to the common good, than a distracted and divided state of the leading minds; so, from the present conflicting position of the public opinion, results the most baneful to education may necessarily be expected. This is an evil, which perhaps time alone can remedy. But whatever may be the means whereby education is imparted,—whether it is directed under the control of the parent, state or church, or whether the energies of the three combined are concentrated to ensure the success of its cause, there are general features which can neither be ignored nor lost sight of, without defeating every exertion that can be made.

The general features, to which I here allude, as characterizing a system of Elementary Education, being based on reason and the constitution of the human mind, will, I trust, recommend themselves to the intelligence of every unbiassed person independently of creed or party.

By Elementary Education is generally understood a course of mental training, which prepares the youth for entering upon either a career of letters or science, or the study of the learned professions, or, in fine, for embracing whatever calling the bent of inclination, or disposition and talent, seem to adapt him;—a training, in other words, that contains *in radice* the first *elements* and *germs* of a more mature study. By this I do not mean to say that the young beginner should be initiated into the first and abstract principles of whatever profession riper years may point

out as his particular sphere of action; for the object of a preparatory course of intellectual discipline is not so much to store the mind with ready prepared information, as to bring out in orderly and healthy succession the several mental faculties, to give to each its appropriate nourishment and invigorating exercise, and to teach the possessor the free and dexterous use of them all. This object, evidently, is not to be obtained by making the mind of the pupil the passive and pleased recipient of the results of scientific demonstrations. To elicit and bring into action the latent faculties of the mind, and to enlighten the intellect for the choice of a future career, should be the primary end of elementary education. To accomplish this very desirable object two things are requisite: In the first place, regard must be had to the nature and capacity of the growing mind, and in the second a choice is to be made in the objects to which the thought is directed in educing its dormant powers.

First. That we may the more easily understand the requirements of the mind passing from an untutored state to a state of knowledge, we must duly weigh the functions it is capable of performing. For in this sense only are we to understand what is meant by the faculties of the mind. These are not constituent parts of the indivisible soul, for such would be absurd; but are the soul itself performing different functions under different modifications. Thus the intellect is nothing more than the *soul perceiving* or performing the functions of perception; the memory again is nothing but the soul vividly representing to itself the past; and so with the other faculties. From this we see that mental development simply consists in exercising the mind in acquiring a facility to perform its different functions. Just as the muscles of the body are developed and strengthened by continual exercise, so the properties of the mind are elicited by the practice of the exercise peculiar to each of them.

The reasoning faculties, from their very nature, claim our first attention. For if we regard the course of human development from the highest scientific point, we shall perceive that it consists in educing more and more the characteristic faculties of humanity in comparison with those of animality. It is in this philosophic sense, that even the most eminent civilization must

be pronounced to be fully accordant with nature; since it is in fact but a more marked manifestation of *man*. Consequently the superiority of one nation or people over another is always determined by the degree of preponderance of the rational element over the animal. Thus the habitual improvidence that characterizes savage life, shows how little influence reason can exercise in that style of existence; for those faculties are then undeveloped, or show some slight activity only in the lowest order, which relates to the use of the senses. With justice, then, do we say that the moulding and strengthening of the reasoning faculties should occupy a most prominent part in a system of preparatory education.

In this, however, nature suggests a method and an order. There are properties which, latent at first, come into full play only at that advanced stage of life for which they are destined. The memory is the faculty earliest developed, and consequently the first exertions of the mind should be directed to expand as much as possible its capacity of retaining facts present, recalling past events, and receiving general principles. We must not regard the mind as an empty blank capable of receiving only a definite number of impressions, but as a vast surface, to use a material illustration, capable of retaining an undetermined number of impressions and expanded by the very action of receiving them. As none of the mental faculties can be exercised entirely independently of the co-operation of the rest, for, as I said before, it is not a part but the whole soul that acts, there is in those exercises, which would seem to belong exclusively to the memory, ample room to cherish the first feeble efforts of the reasoning faculties and the judgment, without blighting the first buds of the pliant mind with intricate ratiocinations. To explain this by a very familiar example, let us suppose that a child has commenced to learn geography, where the nature of the subject matter would seem to demand an almost exclusive exercise of the memory; yet, if even in this reason and judgment have no part, the study of geography will be alike painful and useless to the pupil. For to what purpose would he learn the names of foreign countries, cities, towns, &c., with their position and the number of their inhabitants, unless his judgment were first in-

formed by knowing the relative position of his own district or village, and its population. Without this, it is true, he could recite with the utmost accuracy the latitude and longitude of distant countries, enumerate with the greatest exactness their thousands and millions of population; but yet remain as ignorant as before of the relative nature of their position and of the intrinsic power of numbers. Real knowledge consists in a feeling of consciousness, which memory alone cannot create. This state of consciousness can never be arrived at, until the subject of our knowledge is divested of that foreign idea which often renders it inaccessible to the understanding, and until it is in a manner identified with our very thoughts, with our very perceptions. To do this is a function peculiar to the free use of our reason. To continue my example, the principle of comparison, which implicitly pervades all our reasoning, alone can familiarize the knowledge of geography to the young beginner. He can easily know the position of his native village and the number of its inhabitants, for this falls under the immediate perception of his senses, and then following the economy which nature teaches, always to begin from himself, he passes on and compares the statistics of his own village with those of other countries, which in point of population and position bear the nearest relation to it. This is but one of the many examples that could be adduced to show how reason and judgment, if properly used, can come to the assistance of the memory.

As nature has assigned a time when the memory is the prevailing faculty, so also there is a period when the intellect establishes as it were its superiority. We must here avoid an error, which perhaps is very common, to suppose, namely, that at an early period of life the memory becomes physically weakened. At no period, while the mind is in its normal state, does the memory retire to give place to the functions of the intellect. That the memory becomes weak means exactly the same thing as that it ceases to be exercised, and not that, at an early stage, it is enfeebled from a decay of nature. In youth, while there is no stock of knowledge to commence with, the memory, from necessity, is to be dexterously employed in retaining impressions conveyed by the senses from external objects; at a more advanced

period the mind operates upon the impressions already received, and by its process of combination and reasoning can easily dispense with the services of the memory. It is, then, on this very account that the memory loses, in some degree, its facility of retention. But since nature reserves for manhood the full development of the intellect, it has a right to claim at that advanced period a degree of superiority over the other faculties. It cannot, however, perform its functions in a state isolated from the memory; consequently, while it is undergoing its development, every effort must be made to preserve the strength already acquired by the memory. As it would be an error entirely to depend upon the former; so also it would operate as an obstacle to mental development to discard the latter. To depend entirely upon the intellect would be to disown the authority of the learned, and, by consequence, to reduce science and knowledge to an inchoative state; while, on the other hand, to be exclusively led by the memory would be to fetter down their progress to an everlasting *statu quo*. Each must be used in its own place. But as the object of elementary training is to bring into play the nobler faculties, the highest attention is to be paid to the moulding of the reasoning powers and the judgment. A defect in this is always attended with consequences very pernicious to the pupil. To make the memory the ruling agent in an advanced stage of learning, is to place an obstacle to, if not to stifle, that originality of genius, which under the free action of the intellect would educe the inventive powers of the mind. And, in fact, if we but consult our own experience, we will find that those who, during the course of their preparatory studies, were too servile in learning the opinions of others, without creating in their own minds a conscious feeling of the truth, in after life lack the courage to declare their own sentiments or to enforce them as their convictions.

Having explained the nature of the mental faculties and the rational process of their development, the subject now leads me to consider what studies are in themselves most calculated to bring forth these mental powers and serve at the same time as instruments of their training. The mind being an active agent requires always some object for its cogitations. By using that

continual communication existing between the external and internal world, a species of attraction can be formed by which the qualities of the mind can be elicited and expanded. The memory is the faculty that first comes into action, consequently such studies must be presented as possess the power of causing a vigorous exertion on its part. Next to the immediate perceptions of the senses, language is doubtless the subject in which the young mind feels itself most at home. To learn the many terms established by the arbitrary will of man, and sanctioned by living custom even in a vernacular language, affords a vast field for the cultivation of the memory; while, unquestionably, the initiatory processes of the classical discipline of the Greek and Latin languages cannot but be fitted for exercising this faculty. At the same time that the memory is thus actively employed in acquiring the signs of ideas, the scientific construction of the classical languages will present the reasoning faculties with ample opportunity of fostering their first efforts, of being gradually formed and prepared for those studies which are expressly designed for their cultivation. The analysis and combination of ideas with which classical syntax abounds, form an easy and agreeable exercise in practical logic, and, above all, assist to bring out and exercise that reflex power of attending to what is passing in the mind, which is the distinctive characteristic of intellectual existence. Next to the study of languages, history will form a fertile source for expanding the memory, and will, at the same time, be a preparatory study to philosophy. For facts teach that, since the birth of philosophy, the history of society has been regarded as governed by the history of the human mind.

Although the reasoning powers are sharpened and quickened by a well digested course of arithmetic so congenial to the tender mind, yet their full exercise is reserved for the study of mathematics, philosophy (mental and natural). In these studies the memory is also partially exercised in retaining the data and principles which constitute the subject matter of operation for the intellect But it is not unfrequently we see a false use made of these studies, and particularly of the demonstrative parts of mathematics. This error, which is to be guarded against as

opposed to the very design of constituting mathematics as an instrument of intellectual training, is to regard theoretical problems in all their parts as purely a task of the memory. The office of this faculty, as I said before, is restricted to data and principles. The province of mathematics, under the view of forming a part of elementary education, is to put the learner in possession of a true sense of scientific evidence, to enable him to form the habit of rational and decisive argumentation, and to fulfil the logical conditions of all positive speculation by studying universal positivism at its very source. For in the region of mathematics alone do we find in full development the art of reasoning,—all the resources of which, from the most spontaneous to the most sublime, are thrown open and applied with far more variety and fruitfulness than elsewhere. The abstract portion, in fact, may be regarded as an immense repository of logical resources, ready for use in scientific deduction, while to minds less disposed to abstract speculation, the practical parts will be a means of improving their practical genius.

In the same manner that the study of mathematics improves the deductive powers of the mind, the study of natural philosophy, reasoning as it does from effects, contributes to strengthen the inductive powers. Thus the study of the structure of the material world can be made subservient to mental discipline and intellectual improvement. But to establish order in our thoughts is the particular duty of mental philosophy. The mind, bearing the impress of the Deity, according to the words of the Psalmest—*signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine*,—and being an emanation of the divine harmony of the Increated Intellect, has a natural tendency to order, which shadows forth, although in a feeble manner, its resemblance to the Creator. Order is invariably the result of law. Now, the object of mental philosophy is to establish and investigate the laws of the human thought and of its real object; consequently, while the mind is engaged in this research, the reasoning and reflective faculties are greatly improved, and that order is brought to view, which, otherwise, might lie forever dormant in an untutored mind. A man, it is true, may be possessed of a great amount of natural talent, or what is in other words called common sense, and can, to a cer

tain extent, dispense in practical matters with scientific rules of reasoning; but this does not, in the least, exclude the necessity of an orderly cultivation of those natural parts; on the contrary, let them be what they may, they can never be used to their full advantage, until they first, in some shape or other, pass through the ordeal of science.

Besides the memory and intellect there are other subordinate faculties which also can be made subservient to mental development. The imagination, often the rebellious slave of reason, is rather to be controlled than developed. The chastening influence of taste can best exercise this control. A judicious use of classical studies, by refining the taste and improving the imitative powers, will tend much to limit the extravagance of the imagination within the consistent boundaries of reason. For the early ages of the world, so faithfully represented by classic writers, were peculiarly favourable to the sublime emotions of the glowing imagination. In the progress of science and art the habits of men have undergone a change more favourable to accuracy than to strength or sublimity. The taste, which in a manner regulates the imagination, has no determined criterion; but the veneration, which the learned have now for many centuries paid classical studies, establishes in their favour, as to their utility for refining the taste, a verdict from which there is scarcely an appeal. Christianity itself, which, in the name of religion, condemned the mythology which classic authors embodied in their works, preserved their writings in the name of science with the same veneration as it paid to the pagan models of art. To explain more fully the influence of classical studies on the taste, I will here state what is told of Phidias the famous sculptor. Being asked from what pattern he had formed his noble statue of the Olympian Jove, he said it was from the prototype he found in a line of Homer (Iliad Lib. 1, 530,) where the poet describes the indignant God, and pictures his sable brows bent and his ambrosial curls shaken as he nods. The taste which the poet here displayed in words made the marble obedient to the imagination of the sculptor.

From the view I have presented of these different studies, it can be readily perceived that I have entirely left out of sight

their utility as constituting a part of the knowledge necessary to be acquired by youth. Languages I have considered apart from their necessity in social intercourse; Latin and Greek without regarding their utility as preparatory to the learned professions; Arithmetic apart from its importance in the commercial world; Mathematics without paying regard to the part they occupy in the whole science of inorganic philosophy. I have taken no account of the importance of the study of the physical laws as governing modern invention. I explained mental philosophy as a mere instrument of training without showing how it stands at the very foundation of all sciences. These considerations might afford a rich source for many discourses; but it suffices for my present purpose that I have shown how these studies, independently of their relative usefulness, conduce to mental development.

A system of preparatory education, based upon the principles here laid down, can scarcely fail of success. Its object being to improve the mind, it renders it capable of applying itself indifferently to any pursuit; for it finds in all that common bond of union and that species of natural affinity, which, as Cicero remarks, connect together all those arts that have relation to liberal knowledge. Whatever, then, may be the future career of a youth thus trained, it will be marked with a manly discharge of duty, directed by the dictates of reason and judgment fully developed. His early education will impress itself as a seal upon whatever calling an enlightened intelligence may point out to him. I do not, however, deny that a man gifted with ordinary talent, after a painful and laborious apprenticeship, can, unaided by this systematic training, arrive at an honorary profession and practice it with some degree of success; but his ideas and knowledge of relative duties will ever remain as contracted as his mental faculties are undeveloped.

The influence of this system is not limited to the individual, it extends also to society. From enlarged views an interest for the common welfare always results. A spirit of self-reliance is fostered by cultivated reason, and all the members of society are taught that they are not passive agents in their country's progress, that to aggrandize it is in their power. It is on the acting

in accordance with this conviction that social advancement in a great measure depends. It has also a strong moral tendency. For, not to speak of the humanizing influence of studies in general, a system of education, that brings forth and strengthens the reason and judgment, virtually establishes their superiority over the inferior appetites and subjects all the passions to rules imposed by an ever increasing intelligence. In one word, it is from a sound system of elementary discipline that we are to look for the enlightenment, prosperity, and moral standing of society.

If, then, we value the prosperity of the rising generation and the future interests of our country, we are undoubtedly under obligations to encourage and facilitate the means of acquiring a rational course of elementary education. The first step to this end certainly is, to have our schools under the direction of experienced teachers. It is a grave error to suppose that those who take upon themselves the instruction of youth are sufficiently competent if they are merely initiated into the first elements of letters and numbers. It is not enough that they know barely what is necessary to be taught in their schools. The young is a tender plant that requires most delicate management; and, unless proper care is taken from the very beginning to place learning under an agreeable aspect, prejudices and disgust may arise, which with difficulty can afterwards be removed. Are we to look for this care, this management, from those who have never passed through a course of elementary training, and who, as a matter of course, are ignorant of both method and order? This would be to expect too much of uncultivated nature. Not only, then, must the teacher have a liberal share of knowledge, but he must also have the power and facility of communicating his knowledge; to speak more plainly, he must know what quantity and quality of nourishment the young mind can bear without aversion.

There was a time when it was impracticable to have all our schools under the direction of efficient teachers, there being no permanent high school in which they could be trained; but since the opening of our Seminary this can be no longer alleged. For although the primary end of its founder was to educate for the Church Levites who might meet the urgent demands of his missions; yet, combining the spiritual interests of his people with

their temporal welfare, he disigned that, while it would be for the missions a nursery of zealous labourers, it would at the same time serve for the youth of the country as the best school of preparatory education. These views it has from the very beginning realized. For, not to mention the many missionaries already sent forth, a number of its students are at present teachers in the first schools of this and the neighboring counties. Here, however, in justice to ourselves, I must remark that many wishing to qualify themselves for teaching, and more desirous of a knowledge of particular branches than of real mental training, have applied for, and obtained, admission to classes, which in their regard were on many reasons considered exceptionable. If the proficiency of such, leaving the Seminary with little more than an imperfect acquaintance with their favourite branches, be taken as a criterion, the reputation of the Seminary would necessarily suffer in the estimation of the discerning public. Leaving this consideration out of sight, there is reason to believe that the success of the Seminary has met the most sanguine expectations even of its friends; and, if the past may be regarded as an earnest of the future, that nothing more than the co-operation of parents is necessary to make it the means of diffusing that knowledge by which general intelligence may keep constant pace with the fast increasing population of our country.