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John Holt
The Philosophy of Unschooling

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Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lykez,

For I ȝelde me ȝederly …

Sir Gawayn and þe Grene Knyȝt (III: 4)

Preface

> *It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends. ... Thus we have machines for Education ... The time is sick and out of joint.*
>
> —Thomas Carlyle, Signs of the times, *The Edinburgh Review*, 1829

Sometimes, if it is looked at in the right way, the most trivial of remarks can reveal a whole ethos. It was the remark in the school newsletter that struck me this way. It was written as such communications typically are—brightly cheerful, with a faint undertone of menacing authoritarianism. It informed me that every day I should be reading to my children, *in order to improve their literacy skills* ("Be sure the experience is enjoyable, playful, and encourages children's active involvement; literacy should be engaging for your children, not a chore").

To borrow a phrase from George Orwell, that remark "reminds me, as Samuel Butler said of a cracked church bell he heard somewhere, of the smell of a bug" (Orwell 1970, p. 175). The person whose thought has helped me to articulate to myself just why this remark stinks, and precisely what the source of that stink is, is John Holt (1923–85). Holt was a critic of compulsory schooling and one of the 'fathers' of the modern homeschooling movement. But it was not those aspects of his work—significant though they are—that helped me to understand just what rang so discordantly in that remark in my children's school newsletter.

The problem, Holt suggests, lies in that little phrase 'in order to'; in the thought that in education, one engages in various activities *in order to produce learning*. To use the currently fashionable jargon, students in our 'learning institutions' engage in 'learning activities' in order to produce 'learning outcomes'. The learner's current activity is thus conceived of as an instrument for the production of some future state or capacity (knowledge, skill, etc.). The learner's activity is, that is to say, viewed as an efficient means to an end—its value lying not in the activity itself, but in the future outcome it is intended to bring about. Debates about education work overwhelmingly within this instrumentalist framework, concerning themselves with

questions of the right means (e.g. pedagogical methods) and questions of the right ends (e.g. curricular content).

This essay is written in the conviction that Holt's work contains a philosophically rich and important critique of our culture's instrumentalist conception of the relation between activity and learning. This is not something that has been well understood about Holt's thought. But that, perhaps, is not surprising. After all, as philosopher Charles Travis remarks, "Sometimes an idea is so deeply engraved in the philosophic spirit of a time that it is difficult even to see it as a target, or as threatened, in cases where it is" (Travis 2000, p. xi). If anything is deeply engraved in the spirit of our time, it is instrumentalism: the thought that ends can be separated from means, and that human action must be considered as the pursuit of some desired future end that the action is calculated to produce. Indeed, as Marx pointed out long ago, at the heart of capitalism itself is the treatment of human activity as primarily instrumental. Except for the lucky few, we do not work because our work is worth doing for its own sake; we work because it is a necessary means to earning our living.

Holt's target is the idea that learning—at least if we wish to be 'effective' and 'efficient' in procuring it—is best thought of as something to be aimed at, intentionally and intelligently. Or, to express this target in the terms used above, it is the idea that the best route to learning is *education*—where by that term is meant the undertaking of certain activities *in order to* produce certain kinds of learning. In this book, I argue that Holt offers us a coherent philosophical critique of this apparently commonsensical thought. Stated summarily, the main points of his critique are as follows:

1. The best—most valuable, most significant—kind of learning is necessarily a *by-product* of activities (such as practices of inquiry) done for their own sake—we might say, out of a wholehearted *love* for the activities themselves.
2. That is, the best learning emerges (if all goes well) from *autotelic* activity, rather than from activity engaged in from instrumental motives (i.e. in which the activity is undertaken by the agent primarily as an efficient means to some desired external end).
3. Hence, the best learning cannot be aimed at intentionally; any attempt to do so is self-defeating.
4. The best learning involves not just growth in skills, knowledge and the like, but, overarching these, the development of certain character traits—the *virtues* of the activity in question. So, for example the virtues of inquiry include such character traits as curiosity, wonder, patience, imagination, determination and intellectual courage.
5. Conversely, to engage in activities in a way that is dominated by instrumental motives tends to be destructive of the agent's character. That is, such activity tends to be productive of the *vices* of the activity in question. In the case of inquiry, these vices include such character traits as passivity, incuriosity, rigidity, self-distrust and intellectual cowardice.
6. Furthermore, pursuing activities from instrumentalist motives tends to be destructive of the agent's pleasure (joy, satisfaction) in that activity.

If Holt is right, then the result of this argument is that education—at least, insofar as it is conceived of in instrumental terms—is not a good thing in the way we tend to think it is; that what it can achieve is limited in certain deep, conceptual ways; and that (to borrow a remark of Everett Reimer's) very important kinds of learning occur *in spite of* education, rather than *because* of it.

This essay could be termed an 'analytical reconstruction' of the argument sketched above, and thereby of Holt's philosophical views about the relationships between the concepts of *agency*, *activity*, *motivation* and *learning*. In taking this abstract focus, this essay necessarily leaves out of consideration many other valuable aspects of his work. Holt's books are full of empathic, richly detailed observations of children learning (or failing to learn); they also contain much wise discussion of the 'right relations' between adults and children, and practical advice for those involved in 'unschooling'. I hardly touch on this material. Nor do I deal with his bravely pioneering work on children's rights, or his broader discussions of the political economy of schooling.

So much for what I have not done. What I have done in this essay is to take Holt very seriously as a philosopher, who has things to say to us that we ought to listen to, whether we are ultimately persuaded by his arguments or not. We ought to listen to Holt precisely because his views go against the grain of our culture. They put into question the conceptual frameworks that tend to structure our thoughts about learning and education, and, in doing this, they help make visible the ruling prejudices of the time. That is, I think, just what philosophy ought to do—especially when, as seems so obviously the case to anyone with eyes to see, "the time is sick and out of joint".

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