

## Part I Persons or Products ~ Children are Born Persons<sup>1</sup>

"The consequence of truth is great,  
therefore the judgment of it must not be negligent."

It should not surprise the reader that a chapter, designed to set forth a startling truth, should open with the weighty words of an old Divine (Whichcote). But truths get flat and wonders stale upon us. We do not care much about the starry firmament, the budding trees, the cunning architecture of the birds; and to all except young parents and young brothers and sisters a baby is no longer a marvel. The completeness of the new baby brother is what children admire most, his toes and his fingers, his ears and all the small perfections of him. His guardians have some understanding of the baby; they know that his chief business is to grow and they feed him with food convenient for him. If they are wise they give free play to all the wriggings and stretchings which give power to his feeble muscles. His parents know what he will come to, and feel that here is a new chance for the world. In the meantime, he needs food, sleep and shelter and a great deal of love. So much we all know. But is the baby more than a 'huge oyster'? That is the problem before us and hitherto educators have been inclined to answer it in the negative. Their notion is that by means of a pull here, a push there, a compression elsewhere a person is at last turned out according to the pattern the educator has in his mind.

The other view is that the beautiful infant frame is but the setting of a jewel of such astonishing worth that, put the whole world in one scale and this jewel in the other, and the scale which holds the world flies up outbalanced. A poet looks back on the glimmering haze of his own infancy and this is the sort of thing he sees,—

"I was entertained like an angel with the works of God in their splendor and glory . . . Is it not strange that an infant should be heir of the whole world and see those mysteries which the books of the learned never unfold? . . . The corn was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The

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<sup>1</sup> Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*,

dust and stones of the street were as precious gold. The green trees transported and ravished me. Their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap . . . Boys and girls tumbling in the streets were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die . . . The streets were mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the world was mine and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it." ~ *Traherne*

We are not poets and are disposed to discount the sayings of the poets, but the most prosaic of us comes across evidence of mind in children, and of mind astonishingly alert. Let us consider, in the first two years of life they manage to get through more intellectual effort than any following two years can show.... that to run and jump and climb stairs, even to sit and stand at will must require fully as much reasoned endeavor as it takes in after years to accomplish skating, dancing, skiing, fencing, whatever athletic exercises people spend years in perfecting; and all these the infant accomplishes in his first two years. He learns the properties of matter, knows colors and has first notions of size, solid, liquid; has learned in his third year to articulate with surprising clearness. What is more, he has learned a language, two languages, if he has had the opportunity, and the writer has known of three languages being mastered by a child of three, and one of them was Arabic; mastered, that is, so far that a child can say all that he needs to say in any one of the three—the sort of mastery most of us wish for when we are traveling in foreign countries. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu tells us that in her time the little children of Constantinople prattled in five tongues with a good knowledge of each. If we have not proved that a child is born a person with a mind as complete and as beautiful as his beautiful little body, we can at least show that he always has all the mind he requires for his occasions; that is, that his mind is the instrument of his education and that his education does not produce his mind.

Who shall measure the range of a child's thoughts? His continual questions about God, his speculations about 'Jesus,' are they no more than idle curiosity, or are they symptoms of a God-hunger with which we are all born, and is a child able to comprehend as much of the infinite and the unseen as are his self-complacent elders? Is he 'cabined, cribbed, confined,' in our ways

and does the fairy tale afford a joyful escape to regions where all things are possible? We are told that children have no imagination, that they must needs see and touch, taste and handle, in order to know. While a child's age is still counted by months, he devotes himself to learning the properties of things by touching, pulling, tearing, throwing, tasting, but as months pass into years a glance suffices for all but new things of complicated structure. Life is a continual progress to a child. He does not go over old things in old ways; his joy is to go on. The immensity of his powers brings its own terrors.

Reason is present in the infant as truly as imagination. As soon as he can speak he lets us know that he has pondered the 'cause why' of things and perplexes us with a thousand questions. His 'why?' is ceaseless. Nor are his reasonings always disinterested. How soon the little urchin learns to manage his nurse or mother, to calculate her moods and play upon her feelings! It is in him to be a little tyrant; "he has a will of his own," says his nurse, but she is mistaken in supposing that his stormy manifestations of greed, willfulness, temper, are signs of will. It is when the little boy is able to stop all these and restrain himself with quivering lip that his will comes into play; for he has a conscience too. Before he begins to toddle, he knows the difference between right and wrong; even a baby in arms will blush at the 'naughty baby!' of his nurse; and that strong will of his acts in proportion as he learns the difficult art of obedience; for no one can make a child obey unless he wills to do so, and we all know how small a rebel may make confusion in house or schoolroom.

**Questions and Thoughts to Consider:**

1. Describe how we treat children as an oyster.
2. What are the implications for this view?
3. Describe the relationship between a parent/teacher and a child with this view.
4. What does Mason mean when she talks about children as persons?
5. How does the poet describe the child?
6. Is a human person more than animal?
7. How does the present culture view children? In society? In schooling?
8. Can we distinguish relationships between children as persons and children as products?  
In our lives? In our children's lives?
9. How does the view of children as persons differ from adoring or worshipping the child?
10. What does Mason tell us about the child and his need?