



Pestalozzi on Poverty

By Dr. Arthur Brühlmeier, summarised by Dr. Joanna Nair for PestalozziWorld

Pestalozzi's Life

Pestalozzi considered the problems of poverty throughout his life. As a boy he decided to do all he could to help the poor when he was older. He decided that the best way to do so would be to educate the poor.

Pestalozzi came across poverty in his childhood. His family was one of the privileged families of the town of Zurich, but his father, who never did very well financially, died at the age of 33, when young Heinrich was only five years old. As a result his family became poor and had to struggle. Staying with his grandfather, who was the pastor of Höngg near Zurich, Pestalozzi came to know the far greater need and utter poverty of the poor rural population. In Höngg he saw how the children's lives were ruined by the work they got in the cotton industry and by the indescribably bad schools. The children also lost their naturalness and strength.

In his letters to his future wife, Pestalozzi wrote about his plans to become a farmer in order to help the poor. When he later failed as a farmer, he changed his farm into a home for poor children and had a considerable number of children living with him. This undertaking also failed, and therefore Pestalozzi himself became poorer and poorer. His writing brought in a little, but it was barely enough for his family to survive on.

In 1802 Pestalozzi wrote to Heinrich Zschokke:

‘Did you not know? For thirty years my life was a never-ending economic confusion and a battle against the enraging embarrassment which comes from extreme poverty! Did you not know that for about thirty years I lacked the necessities of life; or that up to this day I can visit neither social gatherings nor churches because I am not clothed and I cannot afford to clothe myself? Oh Zschokke! Do you not know that in the streets I am the laughingstock of the people, because I walk around like a beggar? Do you not know that a thousand times I could not afford lunch and at lunchtime, when even all the poor sat at their tables, I ate my piece of bread with fury in the streets?’

As Pestalozzi himself says, his own experience of poverty meant he had a clearer understanding of the misery of his fellow men, as is shown in one of his letters, written in 1802,

‘Now, being miserable myself, I have come to know the misery of the people and its sources more and more deeply and in a way that no happy man can know them. I suffered what the people suffered and the people showed themselves to me as they were and as they showed themselves to no one else. For many years I sat among them like the owl among the birds. But amidst the derisive laughter of the people deprecating me, amidst their loud cry of, ‘You wretch! You are less capable of helping yourself than the worst day labourer and delude yourself that you could help the people’ - amidst this scornful cry which I read on every lip, the powerful stream of my heart did not cease from striving solely towards my goal of stopping the sources of misery, immersed in which I saw the people around me.’

Pestalozzi found it difficult to get over the fact that the orphanage at Stans, where he was really able to help the poor, was closed in 1798 after being open for only five months. The direction his life took after this meant that he was more involved with the improvement of schools, but, in his mind, in his heart and in all his doings, the purpose of his life was always to educate the poor.

In Yverdon also, where his institute did very well and attracted the attention of Europe, Pestalozzi always struggled to improve the situation of the poor. In 1805, Pestalozzi wrote a whole series of important essays about poverty, for example, 'The Purpose of and Plan for a Charity School'. And in 1807, at the peak of his fame, he wrote to a colleague regarding his institution,

“What I have here is not what I want: I was looking for a home for poor children and am still looking for it, and to that end only my heart is bent.” (PSB 5, 250)

When, in 1818, he saw the possibility of editing his collected works, he donated 35,000 francs of the expected proceeds to the opening of a home for the poor, before he had even made a profit of one franc. In the very same year he founded a home for the poor and a charity school at Clindy, near Yverdon, which made him extremely happy.

When, because of the unfortunate quarrel of the teachers over who should succeed him, Pestalozzi had to leave his institute at Yverdon as an old man of 79, he returned to the Neuuhof, along with his colleague Joseph Schmid, with the aim of establishing a home for the poor as an industrial school and thus of rebuilding what had broken down 45 years before. Sadly, Pestalozzi died before achieving his aim.

The Reasons for Poverty

Why was poverty so widespread in Pestalozzi's time? Individual characteristics, for example a lack of talent and industriousness or moral weakness, can result in a person sinking into poverty. Unavoidable troubles can also bring about a life of poverty; in Pestalozzi's time there was no insurance against illness, fire or the early death of the breadwinner of the family. The effect of any such adversity was likely to be poverty.

However the main reasons for widespread poverty were of a social nature. Over the centuries the farmers were taxed more and more. They were so severely taxed that often they had to pay out more in taxes than the income

they got from farming. One form of tax was the 'tithe', a tax which had originally been paid 'in kind' (with livestock, grain, fruits etc.), and which amounted to a tenth of the agricultural produce. The tithe then started to be made higher and higher. In the area of Zurich there were two villages where the population were prosperous, whereas all the other villages were full of very poor people. The reason was that these two wealthy villages did not have to pay the tithe because of an ancient right they had. The destructive effect of the tithe was thus obvious. Not surprisingly, in the course of the Revolution, Pestalozzi called for the abolition of the tithe and wrote two pamphlets against it.

Another reason for the poverty of Pestalozzi's time was that the population was increasing and so there was not enough suitable farming land for everyone. So, the children of farmers had to look for other ways of making money. They found ways of making a living in the developing textile industry. Therefore, farmers without land gradually became factory workers. However, industrial production did not lead to prosperity because it weakened the ancestral crafts and trades and often badly exploited the unemployed farmers and manual workers. Even though Swiss villages did sometimes make quite a lot of money, Pestalozzi recognised that people used to poverty did not know how to handle this income and thus spent it unwisely which led to inflation, which gradually changed the owner of money into a poor man.

Pestalozzi's Understanding of Poverty

Poverty can be defined in purely economic terms as a lack of the money needed for the satisfaction of basic needs or for the satisfaction of extended needs. To remedy such poverty would also be a purely economic measure.

However, Pestalozzi looks at poverty in a more complex way. He differentiates between a reasonable degree of poverty, which nowadays we would call 'modest circumstances', and a degree of total impoverishment, when a person starves, freezes, does not obtain help and care when sick, and is reduced to a

miserable state of existence. Pestalozzi refers to the latter kind of poverty as 'misery'.

Pestalozzi does not consider the first kind of poverty – the modest living conditions – to be negative. He even considers it to be positive. This is because Pestalozzi believed that the purpose of humankind's existence is not to own an ever-increasing amount. If one's basic needs are satisfied, one can devote oneself to the essential tasks of one's life. According to Pestalozzi the essential tasks are to develop one's own humanity, (i.e. to become moral) and to serve one's community. Life lived in modest circumstances is positive because it forces one to use one's strengths and so to develop them. So, Pestalozzi looks upon such poverty as a positive opportunity. In his opinion the elimination of this opportunity is not a desirable goal. On the contrary, such poverty should be utilised. The education of the poor is therefore not education 'out of poverty into wealth', but instead 'training for poverty'. As Pestalozzi famously wrote, 'The poor have to be brought up for and educated for poverty'.

This sentence has been interpreted in many ways and has also been misinterpreted. It is clear when read in context that Pestalozzi's aim is to provide an education which helps young people to manage happily in their difficult and restrictive living conditions through their own efforts. This education would help them develop the strengths which make it possible for them to develop their essential humanity. He wanted people to be happy with what they had but this does not mean that he wanted to prevent people from doing well for themselves if they were capable of so doing. The sentence also shows Pestalozzi's realism; he knew very well that the children he took from the street, or from a life of begging, would have had to return to very poor conditions after their stay in his institution and that therefore they would not really be helped if, while in the institution, they had been spoilt into expecting a leisurely life of pleasure.

However, Pestalozzi always emphasised that poverty as such does not make humans moral; on the contrary, poverty provides many temptations to behave immorally and many chances for inner dereliction to occur.

If poverty takes the form of 'misery', if one lives in filth and hunger, then such living conditions no longer offer one the opportunity to develop one's humanity. Pestalozzi believed that such abject poverty should be eliminated by the State with direct economic help, the destitute being in such bad circumstances that they can no longer help themselves.

How did Pestalozzi hope to achieve the education of the poor to a life of poverty?

Pestalozzi believed that the child should be settled into poor, but clean and organized living conditions, in which thrift, circumspect activity and regular professional work for the purpose of earning his or her daily bread are a matter of course. Pestalozzi realized that the time of the mainly agricultural way of life was over and that therefore people had to accept the new ways of industrial production and learn to live with them. In particular, a member of the landless poor could not count on being able to earn a living as a farmer but would have to do factory work, and at best, produce part of the food needed by the family in a small field. Therefore, Pestalozzi combined his Neuhof home for the poor with a small factory, in which the children learned how to spin and weave, and with a farm where they learned 'small scale agriculture' – intensive cultivation of a small field. In all Pestalozzi's later plans for the education of the poor, practical, productive activity also played an important part.

In effect, this involved child labour, but in Pestalozzi's day child labour was taken for granted, and it would hardly have occurred to him to prevent a child fit for work from helping on the domestic farm or in any domestic industry just because it had not yet reached 15 years of age. According to Pestalozzi's experience it was not work which spoilt the children, but idleness. What mattered to Pestalozzi was why the children had to work. If it was so that

they learnt how to work properly and if in the process they were brought up to be humane, it was good. But if it was so that the employer could make money through cheap manpower it was terrible, a reprehensible abuse of the young human being, which Pestalozzi rejected vehemently.

“No, the son of the destitute, lost, wretched is not there just to drive a wheel, which action elevates a proud citizen – No! No! He does not exist for this abuse of mankind. How my heart is outraged!”

So, education for work and by work was of great importance. Pestalozzi believed that training for work should be part of a human education. Not only the hands but also the head and the heart should be educated. Pestalozzi also taught the beggar children to use all their senses, he taught them to think, to read, to write and to calculate and he guided them to come to know and understand the world.

Initially, Pestalozzi tried to combine productive work with school learning; the children should become so skilled at spinning and weaving that they would automatically, without needing to pay much attention, have command over this activity. They would be able, at the same time as spinning and weaving, to listen to the teacher, solve arithmetical problems and practise speaking. Later on, Pestalozzi dropped this idea and children did practical work and school learning at different times.

But above all, development of the inner self through moral-religious education was central. Pestalozzi believed that this could not be achieved by talking about morals, nor by reading about morals. He wrote in ‘Leonard and Gertrude’,

“It is futile to say to the poor man, ‘There is a God’, if you do not behave as a human being towards him; and futile to say to the poor and to the little orphan, ‘You have got a Father in Heaven’. Only if you make it possible for the poor man to live before you as a human being, only if you educate the

little orphan so that it is as if it had a father, only thus can you show him that there is a God and that there is a Father in Heaven.”

Pestalozzi always emphasised that the heart of an individual can only be guided to do good by seeing the example of love and positive actions from others and by being loved by others. He believed that love from the heart shows itself in solicitous acts. Thus the success of moral education depends upon the children being able to experience as acts of love the actions of whoever seeks their welfare. The children should see all the efforts and restrictions that they are burdened with as an inseparable part of a loving relationship, which connects the educators with them.

Thus it becomes clear that the education of the poor is not a special, separate area of education, but that it is the same as the general education of humankind. It is true that Pestalozzi first searched for the right way of educating the poor, but since he respected the human being in the poor and wanted to develop that human being, he founded a type of education quite generally appropriate for all humankind.

Pestalozzi believed that with inner strength one can make use of one's external circumstances, whatever they are, to strengthen one's inner self yet further, so that when one is unable to change one's external circumstances, one can lift oneself spiritually above them and live a life of poverty and misfortune as happily as one would live a life of wealth and good fortune.

So, one who lacks financial means need only be outwardly poor; if, because of poverty and in poverty, one's strengths are harmoniously developed through a suitable education, then one is internally rich. It is this internal prosperity that matters. Over and again Pestalozzi states that external poverty (but not destitution!) is generally a better condition for the development of internal prosperity than is external prosperity. This is why, when he educates the poor, he does not want to guide them from external

poverty into external prosperity, but rather wants to use external poverty to develop their internal prosperity.