



JOHN LOCKE: PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS EDUCATION THROUGH MOVEMENT

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Abstract:

While John Locke's significant contributions to liberal political thought and empiricist epistemology are well recognized, his views on physical education are less explored. The central research question addressed here is: What constitutes the ideal model of physical education according to Locke, and how does it contribute to moral development? Using the historical analysis method, this study aims to reconstruct Locke's concept of physical education by synthesizing his key educational writings, particularly. The findings indicate that, for Locke, physical education is not merely a practice focused on physical health; rather, it serves a deeper purpose. He emphasizes that cultivating habits through physical training fosters self-control, moderation, and the ability to subordinate impulses to reason—qualities essential for virtuous citizenship in a liberal state. Furthermore, the study reveals that Locke's ideal model of physical education is that of education through movement.

Keywords: history of physical education, philosophy of physical education

1. Introduction

This article aims to introduce and analyze the concepts of the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) regarding physical education. Historically, Locke's thoughts on physical education have been detailed in various sources (Li, Wang & Li, 2018; Mechikoff, 2013; VanDalen & Bennett, 1971; Sun, 2010; Wilton, 1963; Zhang, 2013), primarily using the textual method. Textual approaches to presenting historical information depend on written and spoken language to express past events, creating a narrative that helps in understanding their importance. Although the textual historical method serves as a type of historical analysis, it does so with a narrow interpretation of history, as the broader historical context is considered secondary and supplementary in the examination of texts

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(Strauss, 1949). Nonetheless, there are alternative strategies to analyze texts within historical research. Specifically, these include a) the method of social and historical contextualization, where texts and concepts are clarified based on particular social factors (Wolin, 2004), b) the archaeological method, which examines texts and ideas not in a historical sequence but as isolated occurrences with their own genesis (Foucault, 2002), and c) the model method (Macpherson, 1962), which emphasizes certain attributes to formulate categories for the subjects being studied. This analysis employs the model method, posing the research question: what represents the model or ideal type of physical education according to Locke. The significance of this research question is reinforced by the absence of any similar inquiries in existing literature to date. To achieve this, the article is structured into four main sections. The initial section discusses the historical and social setting in which Locke lived and outlines the focus of his work. The subsequent section articulates his general views on education. The third section delves into his perspectives on physical education, and the final section offers some concluding remarks.

2. The historical and social context of Locke's work

John Locke was born to Puritan parents in Wrington, England. He lived during the seventeenth century and witnessed two significant revolutions that greatly impacted his life and ideas, as he not only observed these events but also engaged in the political, constitutional, religious, economic, and educational struggles of his era. He is particularly recognized as a key figure in the second revolution, which resulted in the ousting of James II. This revolution was both moderate and successful; moderate in that it did not abolish the monarchy but instead displaced the king and allowed for the election of a new one, and successful as it laid the foundation for England's current political system. Initially trained as a clergyman, Locke later shifted his focus to philosophy and medicine. His interest in physical education for the young seems to have been significantly influenced by his medical studies. Moreover, his medical background led to his collaboration with Lord Ashley, the Earl of Shaftesbury, a prominent leader of the Whig party that opposed the monarchy. From 1666 until Lord Ashley's death in 1683, Locke worked as the lord's secretary and physician. The relationship between reason and politics played a crucial role in Locke's philosophical framework. It is not surprising that his philosophical inquiries were sparked by his political concerns. During those tumultuous years, he was deeply troubled by the issue of power, particularly the notion of the king's absolute authority. His reflections on this matter compelled him to explore natural law and to seek justifications for its origins. This quest led him to navigate epistemological questions through the lens of politics, and he also engaged in educational matters.

Locke published his complete works following the age of fifty, specifically between 1688 and 1695. This body of work has had a significant influence on the fields of political philosophy and epistemology. In his book *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke, 1689), he argued for and established the principles of equality, freedom, and the right to personal and property protection as fundamental legal ideals. This work played a vital

role in shaping the constitutions of the United States, Britain, and France. In his other notable work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke, 1690), he challenged the rationalists of his time, including Descartes, who posited that knowledge arises from reason and that the human mind possesses innate ideas. Through this publication, Locke aimed to demonstrate that innate ideas do not exist and that, instead, the mind functions as a "tabula rasa". This assertion secured his place as one of the leading British empiricist philosophers of the eighteenth century.

Lastly, concerning education, the core ideas of Locke's philosophy are primarily encapsulated in his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (Locke, 1693), which he composed for the education of his son and the daughter of his friend Edward Clarke, a notable landowner. Additionally, these ideas can be found in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (Locke, 1706), which outlines strategies for clear and logical thinking. This work originated when Locke began drafting a new chapter titled *The Conduct of the Understanding* for the fourth edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. However, this chapter was never integrated into the book and was instead published as a separate volume posthumously (Uzgalis, 2024).

3. Education and its goals according to Locke

Locke places great importance on the education of citizens. He emphasizes this significance in the opening pages of his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, noting that "of all the men we meet with, nine parts out of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" (§. 1). Education holds significance for Locke because it connects to politics. Specifically, in the first paragraph of this work, he mentions that "*a sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in this world*" (§. 1). The aim of education, therefore, is to cultivate citizens for the kind of state he supports. But which state and which citizens is Locke referring to?

Locke envisions a liberal state. His work, titled *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke, 1690) was composed to justify the legitimacy of political authority in such a state. For Locke, political authority must acknowledge and maintain the natural condition in which individuals enjoy complete freedom, self-determination, and property rights. For political authority, the focus must always be on the individual. In this regard, the public interest should be prioritized over vague collective objectives. This is because Locke believes people formed societies primarily to safeguard their lives, freedoms, and properties. From the above, it is evident that Locke's liberalism manifests both politically (through the protection of freedom) and economically (through the protection of goods and property).

As a proponent of liberalism, Locke represents the emerging bourgeois class. The education he advocates is not intended for all individuals but rather for a select few, specifically the children of the bourgeoisie. His aim is to educate these children so that they grow into gentlemen. However, the education he imagines for them must focus on the practical aspects of their everyday lives rather than solely on intellectual development. In this respect, Locke aligns with the educational philosophy known as

educational realism. What objectives should guide the education of the young offspring of the bourgeoisie according to Locke?

John Locke's educational aims, both general and specific, reflect his broader vision of human development. He asserts that education should prepare children to become rational and moral adults, with an emphasis on virtue as the most essential quality to acquire. For Locke, virtue includes wisdom and good manners. While intellectual development and a love of learning are important, they are secondary to moral education. This holistic approach prioritizes character development as the ultimate goal of education.

Virtue, according to reason, is closely linked to a deep faith in God, truthfulness, love, and good behavior toward others. It emphasizes the importance of *"...to love and to be good natur'd to others"* (§. 139) and includes the ability to deny oneself unreasonable personal desires, described as *"...a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires where a reason does not authorize them"* (§. 38). Prudence is practically oriented and relates to a person's ability to manage their work skillfully and with foresight. Locke defines wisdom in this context as *"...wisdom I take in the popular acceptation for a man's managing his business ably and with foresight in this world"* (§. 140). When it comes to good manners, Locke advises young people not to hold poor views of themselves or others, stating that one should *"...not to think meanly of ourselves and not to think meanly of others"* (§. 141). A person with good manners demonstrates good intentions and respect for their fellow human beings, refraining from despising, accusing, or unjustly opposing others. Finally, regarding learning, Locke encourages young people to develop freedom of thought by exploring a variety of ways of thinking. He aims for them to strengthen the power of their minds rather than merely increase their encyclopedic knowledge, asserting on the Conduct of the Understanding *"I do not propose that it is a variety and stock of knowledge, but a variety and freedom of thinking is an increase of the powers and activity of the mind, not as an enlargement of its possessions"* (S. 19. 89).

Locke argues that for young people to develop essential qualities through education, discipline must be a fundamental approach. Discipline helps young individuals cultivate habits that align with these desired characteristics. Furthermore, the concept of discipline—understood not only as adherence to behavioral norms but also as daily practice and exercise—aligns well with the theory of tabula rasa. If our minds are indeed blank slates, then any information we inscribe upon them requires effort, which in turn necessitates discipline

4. The goals, program, and methods of physical education according to Locke

Locke's discussions on physical education reflect his views on its objectives, content, and methods. He identified three primary goals. Firstly, he emphasized health, noting, *"...yet the clay cottage is not to be neglected. I shall therefore begin with the case and consider first the health of the body"* (§.2). It is significant that in the opening paragraph of his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he states, *"A sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in this world"* (§. 1).

The second important goal, following physical health, is the cultivation of good manners in young gentlemen, which can also be referred to as their overall upbringing. As he notably said: *"...besides what is to be had from study and books there are other accomplishments necessary for a gentleman to be got by exercise"* (§. 196). A key component of good upbringing is having a well-disciplined character. Finally, according to Locke, the third goal is recreation. He emphasizes that:

"However strict a hand is to be kept up upon all desires of fancy, yet there is one case where fancy must be permitted to speak, and be hearkened to also. Recreation is as necessary as labor or food... For you must never think them set right, till they can find delight in the practice of laudable things; and the useful exercises of the body and mind, taking their turns, make their lives and improvement pleasant in a continuous train of recreations, wherein the weary part is constantly relieved and refreshed." (§. 51)

Locke provides a definition of recreation by stating:

"Nor let it be thought that I mistake, when I call these or the like exercises of manual arts, diversions or recreations: for recreation is not being idle (as every one may observe) but easing the wearied part by change of business." (§.206)

He appears to be one of the first to emphasize the importance of physical recreation for those engaged in sedentary work for health reasons:

"A gentleman's more serious employment I look on to be study and when what demands relaxation and refreshment it should be in one exercise in some exercise of the body which unbends the thought and confirms the health its strength." (§. 203)

Regarding the content of physical education, Locke primarily favored activities such as swimming, horseback riding, fencing, and dancing. He believed that swimming was an ideal form of exercise and argued passionately for its benefits:

"It is that which saves many a man's life; and the Romans thought it so necessary that they ranked it with letters; and it was the common phrase to mark one ill-educated and good for nothing as one who had neither learnt to read nor to swim: Nec literas didicit nec natura." (§. 8)

Horse riding and fencing are associated with a good upbringing. As noted: *"Fencing and Riding the great horse, are looked upon so necessary parts of breeding..."* (§. 198). However, it is also observed that while fencing: *"...it seems to me a good exercise for health, but dangerous to life; the confidence of their skill being apt to engage in quarrels those that think they have learned to use their swords"* (§. 199). Regarding dancing, he mentions that *"For as for the jigging part, and the figures of dances, I count that little or nothing, farther than as it tends to perfect graceful carriage"* (§. 196).

In addition to swimming, horse riding, fencing, and dancing, Locke views play as an essential component of the physical education program. He stated: *"They must not be hindered from being children, or from playing, or doing as children, but from doing ill; all other liberty is to be allowed them"* (§. 69). He believed that play should occur in open outdoor spaces, as outdoor play would also help develop physical endurance:

"Another thing that is of great advantage to everyone's health, but especially children's, is to be much in the open air, and as little as may be by the fire, even in winter. By this he will accustom himself also to heat and cold, shine and rain;" (§. 9)

The physical education program, regarded as a form of recreation, also includes manual labor: *"Gardening or husbandry in general, and working in wood, as a carpenter, joiner, or turner, these being fit and healthy recreations for a man of study or business"* (§. 204).

In discussing physical education methods, Locke emphasizes that the fundamental approach is continuous practice aimed at developing healthy habits. In his book *Of The Conduct of The Understanding* he states: *"Nobody is made anything by hearing of rules or laying them up in his memory; practice must settle the habit of doing without reflecting on the rule"* (§. 4.28). This refers to the method of discipline advocated by Locke. This highlights the method of discipline that Locke advocates. However, it is important to clarify that the type of discipline he refers to is not simply for the sake of discipline; it is not a strict or formal kind of discipline: *"...if the mind be curb'd, and humbled too much in children; if their spirits be abas'd and broken much, by too strict an hand over them, they lose all their vigour and industry, and are in a worse state than the former"* (§. 46). He is discussing a balanced approach to discipline, aiming to achieve a sense of harmony and effectiveness *"a way how to keep up a child's spirit easy, active, and free, and yet at the same time to restrain him from many things he has a mind to, and to draw him to things that are uneasy to him; he, I say, that knows how to reconcile these seeming contradictions, has, in my opinion, got the true secret of education"* (§. 46).

After all, strict and formal discipline would be inconsistent with physical education's recreational goals:

"But because there can be no recreation without delight, which depends not always on reason, but oftner fancy, it must be permitted children not only to divert themselves, but to do it after their own fashion, provided it be innocently, and without prejudice to their health... For you must never think them set right, till they can find delight in the practice of laudable things; and the useful exercises of the body and mind, taking their turns, make their lives and improvement pleasant in a continu'd train of recreations, wherein the weary'd part is constantly reliev'd and refresh'd" (§. 108).

5. Physical education as education through movement

Based on the information presented, a key question arises: What are the characteristics of the ideal type of physical education according to Locke? Unfortunately, Locke's

references to physical education are limited, requiring us to examine his broader work to draw meaningful conclusions.

In his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke emphasizes that the first step in cultivating virtuous habits is:

"to keep the body in strength and vigour, so that it may be able to obey and execute the orders of the mind; the next and principal business is, to set the mind right, that on all occasions it may be dispos'd to consent to nothing but what may be suitable to the dignity and excellency of a rational creature" (§. 31)

This underscores that physical education serves the purpose of moral education. Additionally, he clearly argues that moral education is achieved through habit.:

"It seems plain to me, that the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them. This power is to be got and improv'd by custom, made easy and familiar by an early practice" (§. 38)

The development of habits appears to contradict the notion of autonomy highlighted in the opening section of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* "Men's happiness or misery is most part of their own making" (§. 1). Furthermore, forming habits does not ensure the development of good ones; habituation does not guarantee effective education or proper upbringing. Neill (1989) discusses the conflict between habituation and autonomy, suggesting that for Locke, autonomy is defined as "...an habitual dominion over itself" (§. 75). This means that desires must be controlled by reason, requiring apprentices to be habituated to reason itself. In this context, an exemplary educator neither dogmatizes nor indoctrinates. The educator does not instill fear, as "fear and awe ought to give you the first power over their minds, and love and friendship in riper years to hold it" (§. 42). Instead, the educator inspires self-mastery, self-discipline, and natural growth in the apprentices. Physical education serves as the training ground for self-mastery and self-discipline. By facing physical challenges—such as enduring cold, tolerating discomfort, or exercising regularly—children learn to manage their impulses. By establishing the habit of bodily discipline early on, individuals become better equipped to resist temptation and make rational decisions later in life. A well-disciplined body supports a well-regulated mind, enabling the practice of virtue. The information presented suggests that Locke, despite advocating for "a sound mind in a sound body" as a physician, prioritized the character and behavior of the apprentice. What implications does this have for the ideal type of physical education?

In his work titled "Meaning in Movement, Sport and Physical Education," Arnold (1979) proposed three conceptual dimensions of movement to advocate for the inclusion of physical education in school curricula. The first dimension, education about movement, encompasses theoretical knowledge, such as how to train safely and avoid injury. The second dimension, education within movement, involves the experience of

various movement forms, like climbing. The third dimension, education through movement, includes activities that aim to achieve broader goals, such as developing the endurance needed for training, which ultimately prepares individuals for the challenges of life.

Arnold was responding to Hirst (1979) and Peters (1970), who questioned the inclusion of physical education in school. Based on this discourse, it can be argued that Locke viewed physical education as education through movement. It is important to note that the modern approach to physical education, defined by education about, within, or through movement, was developed in the twentieth century. Physical education that focused on education through movement aligns with the model of character development in public schools of Victorian England. (Mangan, 1975; Stolz, 2014). However, the Victorian model is more closely linked to sports and games than to the specific exercises Locke refers to. Moreover, the role of the instructor is also crucial in Locke's physical education model. In contrast, the physical education model found in Victorian public schools primarily operated without an instructor. Finally, Locke's ideal type or model of physical education involves the development of virtues by cultivating habits through specific physical activities, with the guidance of a teacher.

6. Conclusion

John Locke, in his writings on education, proposed a model of physical education that focuses on physical health. However, Locke also emphasizes the importance of developing a healthy gentleman distinguished by his virtues. Based on this, the model he presents advocates for education through movement.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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