Notes of lessons on the Herbartian method
(Based on Herbart's plan.)

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NOTES OF LESSONS

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(BASED ON HERBART’S PLAN)

BY
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AND
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WITH A PREFACE BY
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PREFACE.

The main idea in the Herbartian system of psychology is that the mind is built up of its own contents. Herbart, following Locke, not only denies the existence of "innate ideas," but puts contemptuously aside the doctrine of inborn faculties or capacities for acquiring knowledge. According to him, and others of his school, the mind possesses but one single original power: that of entering into relation with externals. Given this power, the mind at certain points of contact receives into itself "presentations" (sense percepts), each reception causing growth or, as he would put it, "widening the circle of thought". But these mental contents are not often merely passive, they most frequently become "presentative activities," their force and suggestiveness being increased every time one returns to the surface of consciousness. By a process of selection and assimilation new "presentations" are joined to old, while the earliest and most simple by their interaction produce others of varying complexity.

When a child comes for the first time to a teacher a certain number of these "presentations," with more or less cohesion among themselves, are already to be counted as its mental furniture and equipment, having entered partly by way of experience and partly by way
of intercourse, which is pretty much the same as saying that the mind has found out something of or by itself, and has learnt other things from previous instructors. This being so, Herbart’s idea of the teacher’s work is that out of the “presentations” existent he is to create “Knowledge,” and by intercourse he is to arouse “Sympathy”. As there are no “faculties” save and except the one of receiving impressions from without, the Herbartian does not set out to train and exercise and so develop the mind, but begins to provide the very food and substance of the mind; to build up a mind, in fact, by carefully building “apprehension masses” up. The word “apprehension” was used before Herbart used it, but with slightly different meaning: with him it signifies the taking into the mind new “presentations” by means of groups of similar ideas which already form part of the mental content. It is almost equivalent to assimilation, for by it ideas already in existence receive not alone an addition but a new determination.

It is not the aim of the writer to inquire at length into this theory of “Apperception” and “Apperception Masses,” nor to trace the family resemblance between the action of groups of “similar masses” and our old friend the Association theory, since without at all subscribing to the principles put forward by Herbart we may clearly assent to the conclusion he arrives at, viz., the absolute necessity for teaching thoroughly by means of assimilation; of using in the process of instruction the knowledge, and even the smallest particle of knowledge, already possessed by the pupil; and finally, in the act of instruction, to stimulate, concentrate, associate, reflect on, and cause the pupils consciously to reproduce the subject-matter of the lesson. It is here that Herbart has done good and lasting educational work. He has emphasised the old axiom “Teach from
the known to the unknown”; but he has done more, and shown us how to do it. True, the Herbartian “Steps,” as they have been called, are not wholly new to thoughtful teachers, but they are lucid and concise, and must infallibly prove extremely helpful to young teachers.

As a preliminary, Herbart lays much stress on “Interest” (though we demur at his tendency to identify it with Attention): “To be wearisome,” he says, “is the cardinal sin of instruction.” He also evidently appreciates the position of the inexperienced teacher when about to prepare his lesson; to select and classify and put into order, not alone the matter to be presented, but the mode of presenting it—the “Procedure” as it is called in the “Notes” which follow. “The teacher’s greatest difficulty,” he says, “is to find real particulars; to analyse his own thoughts into their elements.” It is to lighten this difficulty that the present volume of lessons is issued, drawn up in conformity with Herbart’s plan, but, as the reader will see, not following his psychology in the “Aim” of the lesson.

The “Steps” briefly are: Preparation, Presentation, Assimilation, Application or Association, and Recapitulation.

Reference has already been made to the fact that even the youngest pupil comes to a lesson with pre-existing knowledge. Herbart intimates the first step by saying that “This circle [of thought] is to be widened, or its contents more thoroughly examined,” so that the Preparation will sometimes consist of a question or two which acts like a searchlight on the pupil’s mind. The questions oftenest refer to the last lessons in the particular branch, e.g., in Grammar, Arithmetic, Euclid, etc. The questions resuscitate ideas, rules, principles, examples, etc., in order to concentrate or determine
the direction of concentration before the actual teaching begins.

When the right ideas are uppermost in the consciousness, the new cognitions are placed clearly before the class. This is the second step, or Presentation; and under this heading the teacher groups as much new matter as can be clearly apprehended in the allotted time. I do not say assimilated, because it most frequently happens that the work of assimilation (using the word in its general sense) goes on slowly and gradually, perfect illumination coming irregularly.

Nothing is more foreign to the Herbartian method than "cram," so it would be a fundamental error to overload this second stage.

Following the "presentation," or going hand in hand with it, is the work of connecting the new and old, of illustrating, questioning, on, and so helping the pupil towards Assimilation. The place in time in the lesson of Association varies with different branches: e.g., in an object-lesson on an animal the description of its various parts and organs (presentation) is associated with its uses, the latter presentation being the complement of the former. In a natural science lesson the experiments are the associating link, the deductions from them form the new presentations. Lastly, there is the important Recapitulation which summarises and re-pictures for the pupils the important parts of the lesson; which searches their minds by concise and pointed questions, forces them finally to concentrate their attention on the subject-matter as a "unity," and fans their flagging interest.

Such in brief is the Herbartian method of instruction. It is applied in practical form to various branches in the "Notes of Lessons" which follow. Here and there a sufficient number of lessons on one
topic have been written to form a "series," but this has not been attempted in general. If the "Lessons" give to English Teachers a working knowledge of all that is best in the Herbartian method, they will fulfil their end. In regard to the particular "form" they take, there is nothing to remark save to acknowledge indebtedness to P. A. Barnett, Esq., who suggested the word "Procedure" in place of the wider term "Method".

M. FENNELL.

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