A Reflection On

The Value of Knowledge and Education to Achieve Knowledge

By Deacon Lipsmeyer

In the 11th century, Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (commonly known as Avicenna) reintroduced the world to the concept of *Tabula Rasa,* an idea that seeks to pose human beings as blank slates, or *"Tabula Rasa"* which are drawn on by our lived experiences. Over the years, more than a few philosophers have taken to trying to define the concept for themselves, from Descartes interpretation, which poses that the senses are painters on the canvas that is the mind, to Locke, who took the idea to childhood by suggesting that the mind is born a tabula rasa. One thing that has stayed the same through each of these perspectives, though, is the importance of education and specifically the pursuit of experience in relation to the development of mind, body, and soul. While this concept might be unique to philosophy, its underlying themes are evident in almost every aspect of day-to-day life. When great thinkers are asked about their success, they always credit it to one thing: a lifelong pursuit of education. As psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison said in her book *Exuberance: The Passion for Life*, "the pursuit of knowledge is an intoxicant… indeed, exhilaration in the pursuit of knowledge is part of what has kept our species so adaptive" (180). Once the chance for education is stripped from an individual, their ability to find success in the modern world and provide for their family becomes limited with little possibility to elevate their social standing, because they are forced to remain tabula rasa forever. It is only through the pursuit of knowledge that a person can allow themselves to become truly liberated.

Take, for example, the works of abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, who, in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass,* sets out to describe his process of learning to read and write. This all largely takes place in chapter seven after Douglas has moved in with the family of Master Hugh, where he begins to use the family's newspapers to teach himself how to read, saying, "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell." Despite constant punishment from his mistress, the thing that motivated Douglass was his passion for knowledge, always being seen from that point on with a book in his hand. This allows him to become familiar with early anti-slavery leaders like Louis Sheridan, whose exploits would go on to inspire the twelve-year-old Douglas. As for how Douglas taught himself to write, it was again pure passion, learning in the beginning at a shipyard by seeing the letters on timber, before eventually teaching himself by writing in the margins of old copybooks left around the house. This dedication to learning despite the adversity he faced was precisely what allowed Douglas to become such a key leader in the abolitionist movement through his paper *The North Star,* as well as write a bestselling autobiography about his experience as a slave. When Douglas was born, he was tabula rasa, or he wasn't born destined to achieve all these things; it was only through the imprint of educating himself that he possessed the skills possible to become the influential figure that he became.

One idea that is often not presented, however, is that the human mind can return to tabula rasa. Such is the case in Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* in which he sets out to establish what he knows for certain so that he may remove all uncertainty from his life. Specifically, he does this with a couple of straightforward arguments; the first being that our senses possess the power to deceive us, and the second being that we may just be dreaming, and that has the power to deceive us. That leaves the mind and body, which Descartes compares to a

piece of wax, saying, “For if I judge that the wax is or exists from the fact that I see it, it certainly follows much more clearly that I am or that I exist myself from the fact that I see it.” Over the course of his six meditations, he uses these guiding principles to establish his faith not only in himself but also in the larger universe, as well as God. Today he is revered as one of the fathers of modern philosophy, but these revelations are only possibly even back in the 1600s. Descartes was an incredibly educated man, having gone to both military school at the Jesuit Collège Royal Henry-Le-Grand as well as the Université de Poitiers and the University of Franeker, all before settling into philosophy. It was his education that allowed him the luxury to question his education and return himself to tabula rasa, all so that he could prove what was real and start filling up his slate again.

Perhaps then the strongest supporter of the idea of tabula rasa, and thus the pursuit of education, is English philosopher John Locke, who in his book *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* spends a whole chapter discussing the importance of nurture and education on the development of a child. It begins in section fifty-five when Locke says, “Children, I confess, are not born in this full state of equality, though they are born to it.” Just three sections later, this idea rears its head again, saying in fifty-eight, “The power, then, that parents have over their children arises from that duty which is incumbent on them… To inform the mind and govern the actions of their yet ignorant nonage till reason shall take its place and ease them of that trouble.” Lastly, in section sixty-nine, he describes the duty of providing an education as one that belongs to the father; however it is fit to be carried out. It is clear that Locke understands the importance of education for all children, specifically so that they are all given the privilege of living naturally. Something which he believes to be mutually exclusive, as he claims in section sixty-three, “the freedom then of man, and liberty of acting according to his own will, is grounded on his having

reason, which is able to instruct him in that law he is to govern himself." Reason is taught, and without the education that is often provided by a parental figure, children are set up to forever be stuck as a blank slate without hope to live free or live naturally.

There are, of course, those who demonstrate that too much education can be a bad thing. In *Diary of a Madman* by Nikolai Gogol, Poprishchin spends the entire story fixating on his social status only to end up suffering a schizophrenic breakdown because of his refusal to accept reality. Or how in the end of *Faust* we see the title character relinquish all the knowledge that he has been granted by Mephistopheles because of the lack of fulfillment and isolation that it has caused him. The best example of the dangers of knowledge, however, comes from Bartolomé De Las Casas's *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, where education is shown to be a factor in spreading hatred. From the beginning of the book, the native people are treated as simple and docile people who want nothing more than to live in peace. This contrasts with the way that the Spanish are portrayed, though, as they are shown to be both educated and malicious, using their process of education to conquer and slaughter. In this context, all three of these stories demonstrate that when used as a tool for oppression, education can become a weapon that suppresses those who are too vulnerable to protect themselves. Yet still, even when education is being used as a weapon in the modern world, the most powerful tool to fight it back with is information.

In the end, it is ultimately the educated who change the world, from Fredrick Douglas to Rene Descartes to John Locke—all incredible minds with one common thread linking them together. They all believed in the importance of a lifelong educational journey, one that starts early in childhood and moves all the way through to the grave. None of them were born with the predisposition to achieve all they did, yet they leveraged their education to surpass their most

ambitious aspirations. All of them used their tabula rasa as an inspiration to fill as much of their slate as possible because it is only through the pursuit of knowledge that a person can allow themself to become truly liberated. Today attempts to limit education are not uncommon, with people like President Trump promising to do away with the Department of Education as well as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis defunding the diversity and inclusion programs across the state. These programs seek to defund education as a means of controlling the population through tabula rasa, because a blank slate is easier to imprint on than one filled with knowledge and information. The only way to fight back is to keep learning, and growing, and seeking to get better, because without education, how are we any different than the natives in Las Casas ravaged because of their lack of knowledge?