

John Ruskin—8 Profound and Relevant Thoughts on Education

John Ruskin (1819-1900), the Victorian English artist and critic, has left behind him not only a school of artwork but also a considerable body of written material – some of it quite profound.

In an age where “advanced” and “progressive” ideas were becoming more and more common, Ruskin stood as an advocate not only for common sense and objective morals, but also for a more aesthetic sense of proportion and beauty inspired by the classics of Western civilisation. His writing, often concerned with art, consistently leaves the impression that he was concerned with far more than just painting – and indeed, his ideas would leave their influence on figures as disparate as Mohandas Gandhi, Lev Tolstoy, Gu Hongming, G. K. Chesterton, Frank Lloyd Wright, Clement Attlee, and Phillip Blond.

Here are a few of his choice quotes on the subject of education and its ends:

1) “All books are divisible into two classes: the books of the hours, and the books of all time.”

2) “To use books rightly, [is] to go to them for help: to appeal to them when our knowledge and power of thought failed: to be led by them into wider sight – purer conception – than our own, and receive from them the united sentence of the judges and councils of all time, against our solitary and unstable opinion.”

3) "To be taught to read—what is the use of that, if you know not whether what you read is false or true? To be taught to write or to speak—but what is the use of speaking, if you have nothing to say? To be taught to think—nay, what is the use of being able to think, if you have nothing to think of?"

4) "Reading and writing are in no sense education, unless they contribute to this end of making us feel kindly towards all creatures."

5) "The entire object of true education is to make people not merely do the right things, but enjoy the right things – not merely industrious, but to love industry – not merely learned, but to love knowledge – not merely pure, but to love purity – not merely just, but to hunger and thirst after justice."

6) "No human actions ever were intended by the Maker of men to be guided by balances of expediency, but by balances of justice. No man ever knew, or can know, what will be the ultimate result of any given line of conduct. But every man may know what is a just and unjust act."

7) "Observe, you are put to stern choice in this matter. You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them."

8) "It is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity."