

# Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Excerpts from *The Education of the Human Race* (1777)

## Abstract

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The renowned playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) shifted German intellectual life away from the optimistic (and frequently abstract and deductivist) rationalism of his predecessors Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff. Though embedded in the Christian theological tradition, Lessing embraced Enlightenment Deism ever more firmly, and after his death charges of pantheistic/atheistic Spinozism arose against him. In this celebrated and influential text, Lessing makes an important contribution to emergent German historicism, that is, to the explanation and interpretation of the world in terms of historically unfolding processes. He argues that the universally rational core of religious truth becomes evident to humanity in the course of history, and in the form of historically evolving religious understandings, to which cultural traditions apart from Judaism and Christianity also contribute their share. Controversial, but also persuasive to many educated Germans, was Lessing's view that orthodox Christianity would eventually be superseded by higher forms of religious understanding that were compatible with universal reason.

## Source

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### The Education of the Human Race

§ 1: What education is to the individual, revelation is to the human race as a whole.

§ 2: Education is revelation that affects the individual; and revelation is education which has affected, and still affects, the human race.

§ 3: I shall not inquire here as to whether it would be of value to pedagogy to consider education from this point of view. But in theology, the conception of revelation as an education of the human race may certainly be of great value and may serve to remove many difficulties.

§ 4: Education gives man nothing that he could not acquire by himself, but it gives him what he could acquire by himself more quickly and less arduously. Similarly, revelation gives the human race nothing that unaided human reason could not attain by itself; but revelation has bestowed, and still bestows, the most important of these things somewhat sooner.

§ 5: And just as education is not indifferent to the order in which it develops man's faculties, and just as it cannot impart everything to man all at once, God, too, has had to maintain a certain order, a certain measure, in his revelation.

§ 6: Even if the first man was immediately endowed with a concept of the one and only God, this concept, imparted and not acquired by independent thought, could not possibly maintain its integrity for long. As soon as human reason, left to its own devices, began to work upon it, it broke up the one Immeasurable into many Measurables and assigned each a separate designation.

§ 7: Polytheism and idolatry thus arose naturally. And who knows how many millions of years human reason might have spent drifting among these errors – despite the fact that, in all places and at all times, certain individual men recognized them as such – had it not pleased God to give it a better direction through a new impulse.

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§ 8: But when he no longer could or would reveal himself to each *individual man*, he selected an *individual people* for his special education, and he selected precisely the least refined and most uncivilized people, in order to start with them from the very beginning.

§ 9: This was the people of Israel, of whom we know nothing when it comes to their divine worship in Egypt, for such despised slaves were not allowed to take part in the divine worship of the Egyptians, and the God of their fathers had become absolutely forgotten by them.

§ 10: Perhaps the Egyptians had expressly prohibited them from having any and all gods, forcing them to believe that they had no god or gods, and that to have a god or gods was the prerogative of the superior Egyptians only – having done so in order to tyrannize them with all the greater a pretense of fairness. Do Christians treat their slaves very differently even now?

§ 11: To this primitive people, God first let himself be proclaimed merely as the god of their fathers, in order to acquaint and familiarize them with the idea of a god of their own and to inspire confidence in him.

§ 12: Through the miracles by which he led them out of Egypt and settled them in Canaan, he proved himself to be a god mightier than any other.

§ 13: And as he continued to prove himself to them as the mightiest of all – which, of course, only *one* can be – he gradually accustomed the people to the concept of the *One*.

§ 14: But how far indeed was this concept of the One from the true transcendental concept of the One, which reason learned so much later to deduce with certainty from the concept of the infinite.

§ 15: Even if the best among the people were more or less approaching the true concept of the One – the people as a whole were long unable to elevate themselves; and this was the only true reason why they so often abandoned their one and only God and thought they could find the One (that is, the mightiest) in some other god of another people.

§ 16: But what kind of *moral* education was such a primitive people, so incapable of abstract thoughts, and still so completely in a state of childhood, ready for? None other than that appropriate to the age of childhood: education through direct physical punishment and rewards.

§ 17: Thus, education and revelation meet here, too. God was still unable to give his people any other religion, any other law, than one through whose observance or non-observance they hoped, or feared, to be happy or unhappy here on Earth. For their vision did not extend beyond this life. They knew of no immortality of the soul; they yearned for no future life. But had things been revealed for which their reason was still unprepared – would God have done any different than commit the error of the vain pedagogue who would rather rush the child along and boast of him, than give him thorough instruction?

§ 18: But what, one will ask, was the purpose of educating such a primitive people, a people with whom God had to start so entirely from the very beginning? My reply is: in order, later on, to be able to use particular members of this people with greater assuredness as educators of all other peoples. In them, he was educating the future teachers of the human race. This is what the Jews became, what only the Jews could become, only men from a people thusly educated.

§ 19: And further: when the child had grown up with blows and caresses and then reached the age of understanding, the father promptly sent it out into foreign lands, and there it recognized immediately the good it had enjoyed but had failed to appreciate in its father's house.

§ 20: While God was leading his chosen people through all the stages of a child's education, the other

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peoples of the earth were making their way according to the light of reason. Most of them trailed far behind the chosen people; only a few got ahead of it. This, too, happens in the case of children who are allowed to grow up on their own: many remain completely primitive; others develop themselves to an astonishing extent.

§ 21: But just as these more fortunate few in no way disprove the usefulness and necessity of instruction, neither do the few heathen peoples who up until now seemed more advanced than the chosen people, even in their knowledge of God, in any way disprove revelation. The child of education starts off with slow but sure steps; it is late in overtaking many a more fortunately organized child of nature; but it overtakes this child nonetheless, and is thereafter never overtaken by it again.

§ 22: Similarly (leaving aside the doctrine of the unity of God, which is both present and absent in the books of the Old Testament), I say, the fact that at least the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the associated doctrine of punishment and reward in a future life are not found therein does just as little to disprove the divine origin of these books. All this notwithstanding, these books may contain perfect truth with regard to all the miracles and prophecies described therein. For let us suppose that these doctrines were not only *missing* therein, but that they were also *not even true*; let us suppose that, for man, everything comes to an end with this life – would the existence of God therefore be any less demonstrated thereby? Would God therefore be any less free? Would it therefore befit God any less to take charge of the temporal destiny of any one people among this transitory human race? The miracles he performed for the Jews, the prophecies that he let be recorded through them, were by no means only for the few mortal Jews in whose time they had happened and were recorded. His intentions here concerned the entire Jewish people, the whole human race, which may be destined to remain here on earth forever, even if every individual Jew, every individual man, were to perish forever.

§ 23: Again. The absence of these doctrines in the writings of the Old Testament in no way disproves their divinity. Moses was surely sent from God, even though the sanction of his law extended only to this life. For why should it extend further? He was sent only to the *Israelites*, to the Israelites of *that time*, and his mission was perfectly suited to the knowledge, capacities, and the inclinations of the Israelites of that time, as well as to their *future* destiny. That is enough.

§ 24: [William] Warburton<sup>[1]</sup> should have gone this far and no further. But the learned man overstretched his bow. Not content that the absence of those doctrines was no discredit to the divine mission of Moses, he even construed their absence as proof of the divinity of Moses' mission. If he had only sought to base his proof on the suitability of such a law to such a people! But he sought refuge in a continuous miracle that stretched unbroken from Moses to Christ, by which God made every individual Jew just as happy or as unhappy as he deserved to be based on his level of obedience or disobedience to the law. This miracle compensated for the absence of those doctrines without which no state can endure, and this compensation [Warburton argued] proves precisely what the absence, at first glance, seemed to deny.

§ 25: How fortunate it was that Warburton could find nothing to verify, or even make probable, [the existence of] this continuing miracle in which he saw the essential element of Israelite theocracy. For had he been able to, he really would have made the difficulty insuperable – for me at least. For that which was supposed to establish the divine character of Moses' mission would have actually cast doubt on the matter; and while God certainly did not intend to reveal the matter then, he surely did not intend to hinder it either.

§ 26: I will explain myself by describing the opposite of revelation. A primer for children may very well pass over in silence this or that important element of the science or art that it expounds, if, according to the judgment of the teacher, it is not yet appropriate for the capacities of the children for whom he is writing. But the primer must, under no circumstances, contain anything that will block the children's path to those important withheld elements or serve to divert them. Rather all avenues to these elements

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must be scrupulously left open to them; and to divert the children from even one of these paths, or to cause them to enter it later than they need, would be enough to turn the mere incompleteness of the primer into a substantial fault.

§ 27: Thus the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and future recompense could just as well be omitted from the writings of the Old Testament, the primers of the ancient Israelites, a primitive people undisciplined in thought. But those writings could, under no circumstances, contain anything that might in any way delay the people for whom they were written on the path to this great truth. And what, to say the least, would have delayed the people more than to have that marvelous recompense promised in this very life, and promised by one who makes no promises that he does not keep.

§ 28: For although the unequal distribution of goods of this life, in which so little attention seems to be paid to virtue and vice, does not afford the strongest proof of the immortality of the soul and of a future life in which this knot might be untangled, it is nevertheless certain that without this knot human understanding would not for a long time, perhaps never, have arrived at better and more convincing proofs. For what would have been able to compel it to seek these better proofs? Mere curiosity?

§ 29: This or that Israelite, to be sure, might have extended to each individual member of the state those divine promises and threats which concerned the state as a whole and might have persisted in the firm belief that whoever is pious must also be happy, and that whoever is, or becomes, unhappy must be bearing the punishment for his misdeeds, a punishment that would immediately transform itself into blessing as soon as he desisted in his transgression. Such a person appears to have written the Book of Job, for its plan is very much in this spirit.

§ 30: But it was impossible for daily experience to confirm this belief, for, had it done so, a people that had undergone such an experience would have forever lost their opportunity to recognize and receive a truth that was still unfamiliar to it. For if the pious man were absolutely happy, and if it were also an essential part of his happiness that his contentment not be interrupted by frightful thoughts of death, that he should die old and *completely satisfied with life*, how then could he yearn for another life; how could he reflect upon something for which he did not yearn? But if the pious man did not reflect on it, who then would? The villain who felt the punishment of his misdeeds and, if he cursed this life, would also gladly renounce any other?

§ 31: It mattered much less that this or that Israelite directly and explicitly denied the immortality of the soul and future recompense, because the law did not concern itself therewith. The denial of an individual – even if he were a Solomon – did not impede the progress of the common understanding and was already proof in and of itself that the nation had taken a great step toward the truth. For the individual only denies what many are beginning to take into consideration, and to take into consideration something which had previously been of no concern to anyone at all is half the way to knowledge.

§ 32: Let us also acknowledge that it is a heroic obedience to obey the laws of God simply because they are the laws of God, and not because He has promised to reward obedience to them here and in the hereafter; to obey them even though a future reward may be entirely doubtful and an earthly one not quite so certain, either.

§ 33: If a people has been raised to this heroic obedience towards God, should it not be destined, should it not be able, above all others, to carry out divine intentions of a quite specific character? Let the soldier who offers blind obedience to his leader also be convinced of his leader's sagacity, and say what this leader would not dare to undertake with him.

§ 34: Yet the Jewish people had venerated in their Jehovah the mightiest rather than the wisest of all Gods; yet they had feared Him as a Jealous God rather than loved Him: this, too, is a proof that the

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conceptions they had of their most supreme, One God were not exactly the right concepts we should have of God. But now the time had come for these concepts of theirs to be expanded, ennobled, and corrected, to which end God made use of a perfectly natural means, a better and more accurate criteria, by which the Jewish people now had occasion to assess him.

§ 35: Instead of assessing him, as hitherto, only in contrast to the miserable idols of the small, primitive neighboring tribes with whom they lived in constant rivalry, they began, in captivity under the wise Persian, to measure him against the being of all beings, as recognized and revered by a more proficient reason.

§ 36: Revelation had guided their reason; and now reason suddenly illuminated their revelation.

§ 37: This was the first reciprocal service that the two (reason and revelation) performed for each other; and such a reciprocal influence is so far from being unbecoming to the Author of them both that without it either of them would have been useless.

§ 38: The child, sent into foreign lands, saw other children who knew more and lived more becomingly, and asked itself, in shame, "Why do I not know that, too? Why do I not live in this way, too? Should I not have been taught this in my father's house; should I not have been instructed to behave as such?" Then the child once again seeks out his primer, which had long since repulsed him, in order to cast the blame upon the primer. But lo and behold, he realizes that the blame does not lie in the books; that the blame for his not knowing this very thing already and living this very way already lies entirely with him.

§ 39: Now that the Jews, through the means of the purer Persian doctrine, recognized in their Jehovah not merely the greatest of all national deities but God; and now that they could more readily find him and point him out to others in their sacred writings, inasmuch as he was really in them; and now that they evinced – or were at least instructed in these sacred writings to evince – as great an aversion to sensuous representations as the Persians had always felt; what wonder is it that they found favor in the eyes of Cyrus, with divine worship which he surely recognized as being far inferior to pure Sabianism, and yet still far superior to the rude idolatries which, instead of the newer conception, had taken possession of the forsaken land of the Jews.

§ 40: Thus enlightened with regard to their own unrecognized treasures, they returned and became an entirely different people, whose first concern was to make this enlightenment permanent among themselves. Soon, apostasy and idolatry among them was out of the question. For it is possible to be unfaithful to a national god, but never to God once he has been recognized.

§ 41: The theologians have sought to explain this complete change in the Jewish people in various ways; and one of them, who has well demonstrated the inadequacy of all these various explanations, finally concluded that the true cause of the change was "the apparent fulfillment of the oral and written prophecies concerning the Babylonian captivity and the release from it." But even this reason can be the true one only insofar as it implies the, by now, newly refined conception of God. The Jews must only now have recognized that [the power] to perform miracles and prophesy the future is accorded to God alone, whereas they had formerly ascribed both of these powers to false gods, which is why even miracles and prophecies had hitherto made such a weak and fleeting impression upon them.

§ 42: Doubtless, the Jews became more familiar with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul under the Chaldeans and Persians. They became more familiar with it in the schools of the Greek philosophers in Egypt.

§ 43: But as this doctrine of immortality did not have the same relevance to their sacred writings as the doctrine of the unity and attributes of God, since the former had been crudely overlooked by this sensual people, whereas the latter would be sought after, and since the doctrine of immortality still required

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*preparatory exercises*, whereas only *allusions* and *hints* had been given as yet, belief in the immortality of the soul could naturally never become the belief of the entire people. It was, and remained, the belief of only a certain sect among them.

§ 44: An example of what I call *preparatory exercises* for the doctrine of immortality might be the divine threat to inflict the sins of the fathers on the children down to the third and fourth generation. This accustomed the fathers to be mindful of their most distant descendants, and to feel in advance, the misfortune that they had brought upon these guiltless ones.

§ 45: An example of what I call *an allusion* might be something that was intended only to excite curiosity and to occasion questions, such as the frequently reiterated phrase to describe death: “to be gathered to his fathers.”

§ 46: An example of what I call *a hint* might be something that already contains some germ from which the truth, still withheld, may develop. Christ’s inference from the naming of God as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” is one such example. To me, this hint certainly seems capable of being developed into a strong proof.

§ 47: The *positive* perfection of a primer consists of such preparatory exercises, and allusions; just as the *negative* perfection consists of the aforementioned quality of not blocking or making more difficult the path to those truths which are still withheld.

§ 48: Add to this narrative embedding and style – 1) The embedding of abstract truths, which could not be entirely passed over, in allegories and instructive individual examples are presented as actual occurrences. Of this sort are: the creation under the image of the dawning day, the origin of moral evil in the story of the forbidden tree, the source of linguistic diversity in the story of the tower of Babel, etc.

§ 49: 2) The style – sometimes plain and simple, sometimes poetical, always full of tautologies, but of the sort that exercises one’s acumen, since sometimes it appears to be saying something different while really saying the same thing, and sometimes it appears to be saying the same thing, while really implying, or potentially implying, something different –

§ 50: And you have all the good qualities of a primer, for children as well as for a childlike people.

§ 51: But every primer is only for a certain age. To persist in using a primer longer than recommended, when a child has outgrown it, is harmful. For in order to do this in a somewhat useful kind of way, one must read more into it than is really there, insert more into it than it can contain. One must look for and make too many allusions and hints; squeeze too much out of the allegories; interpret examples too circumstantially; squeeze the words too hard. This gives the child a narrow, skewed, hair-splitting understanding; it makes him secretive, superstitious, full of contempt for all that is comprehensible and easy to understand.

§ 52: The very way in which the Rabbis handled their sacred books! The very character that they thereby imparted to the character of their people!

§ 53: A better Instructor must come and rip the exhausted primer from the child’s hands. Christ came!

§ 54: That portion of the human race that God had wanted to include in one educational plan was ripe for the second great step in its education. But he had only wanted to include in the plan that portion of the human race that had already united itself through language, deeds, government, and other natural and political relationships.

§ 55: That is, that portion of the human race that had come so far in the exercise of its reason that it

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required, and could make use of, nobler and worthier motives for moral action than temporal rewards and punishments, which had hitherto been its guide. The child had become a boy. Sweetmeats and toys gave way to the budding desire to become just as free, just as honored, and just as happy as its elder brethren.

§ 56: The better individuals of that portion of the human race had already been accustomed to letting themselves be ruled by a shadow of such nobler motives. The Greek or the Roman did everything to live on after this life, even if only in the memory of his fellow citizens.

§ 57: It was time for another, *true* life after this one to gain influence over his actions.

§ 58: And so Christ became the first *reliable, practical* teacher of the immortality of the soul.

§ 59: The first *reliable* teacher. – Reliable through the prophecies that appeared fulfilled in him; reliable through the miracles that he performed; reliable through his own resurrection after a death by which he had sealed his doctrine. Whether we can still prove this resurrection, these miracles, is a question I shall put aside, just as I shall put aside the question of who the person of this Christ was. All of this may have been important back then for the *acceptance* of his doctrine, but it is no longer so important now for the recognition of the doctrine's truth.

§ 60: The first *practical* teacher. – For it is one thing to conjecture, wish for, and believe in the immortality of the soul as a philosophic speculation: quite another to direct one's inner and outer actions in accordance therewith.

§ 61: And at least Christ was the first to teach this. For although the belief that evil deeds will be punished in the afterlife had already been introduced among many peoples before his time, this concerned only those deeds that were detrimental to civil society and therefore already subject to punishment in civil society. To recommend an inner purity of heart with a view toward another life was reserved for him alone.

§ 62: His disciples faithfully propagated this doctrine. And if they had had no other merit than that of having effected a more general circulation, among many peoples, of a truth that Christ appeared to have intended for the Jews alone, they ought, for that very reason alone, to be considered among the conservators and benefactors of the human race.

§ 63: But that they transferred other doctrines whose truth was less evident, whose benefits were less substantial – how could it be otherwise? Let us not blame them for this, but rather earnestly inquire whether these commingled doctrines did not become a new *guiding impulse* for human reason.

§ 64: It is already clear from experience at least, that the New Testament scriptures, in which these doctrines were eventually preserved, have afforded, and continue to afford, the second, better primer for the human race.

§ 65: For seven hundred years, they have occupied human reason more than all other books, have illuminated it more than all other books, even if only through the light that human reason itself brought into them.

§ 66: It would have been impossible for any other book to become so generally known among such different peoples: and indisputably, the fact that such diverse modes of thought have occupied themselves with this same book has done more to advance human understanding than if each people had had its very own primer.

§ 67: It was also highly necessary that each people should consider this book for a time as the *non plus*

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*ultra* of its knowledge. For that is also how a boy must regard his primer at the start, lest his impatience to be done with it should hurry him on to things for which he has not yet laid the foundation.

§ 68: Another thing which is of the greatest importance at this point – Beware, you more able individual who stamp and fret on the last page of this primer, take care not to let your weaker classmates notice what you sense or already begin to see!

§ 69: Until these weaker fellow pupils have caught up with you, better return once more to this primer, and examine whether that which you consider mere procedural methods or didactic expedients, is not really something more.

§ 70: In the infancy of the human race, on the example of the doctrine of God's unity, you have seen that God reveals even mere rational truths immediately; or permitted and caused mere rational truths to be taught as immediately revealed truths for some time in order to disseminate them the more rapidly and establish them more firmly.

§ 71: In the boyhood of the human race you find the same in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. It is *preached* in the second, better primer as a revelation, not *taught* as a result of human reason.

§ 72: Just as we can henceforth dispense with the Old Testament in the doctrine of the unity of God, and just as we are beginning to dispense, by degrees, with the New Testament, in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, might there not also be other similar truths foreshadowed in this book, [truths] which we are to marvel at, as revelations, until the time comes when human reason has learned to deduce them from other demonstrated truths and bind them with them?

§ 73: For example, the doctrine of the Trinity. – What if this doctrine, after endless wanderings to and fro, should only lead human understanding to finally recognize that God cannot possibly be *one* in the sense in which finite things are *one*; that his unity must be a kind of transcendental unity which does not exclude a kind of plurality. – Must not God at least have the most perfect conception of himself, i.e., a conception which includes everything which is in him? But would it include everything which is in him if it contained only a conception, a mere possibility of his *essential reality*, as well as of His other qualities? This possibility exhausts the essence of his other qualities. But does it also exhaust that of his essential reality? I think not. – Consequently God can either have no perfect conception of himself at all, or this perfect conception is just as essentially real as he himself is and so forth. – Certainly, my image in the mirror is nothing but an empty representation of me because it has of me only that from which rays of light fall upon its surface. But if this picture had everything, everything without exception, which I myself have, would it then be still an empty representation, or rather a true duplicate of myself? – If I believe I recognize a similar duplication in God, I may not be wrong insofar as language is subject to my concepts; and this as much remains forever indisputable, that those who wished to make this idea popular could hardly have expressed themselves more comprehensibly and appropriately than by choosing the appellation of a *Son* whom God created from eternity.

§ 74: And the doctrine of Original Sin. What if everything finally convinced us that man, at the *first and lowest* stage of his humanity, is not master enough of his actions to be able to obey moral laws?

§ 75: And the doctrine of the Son's satisfaction. What if everything finally compelled us to assume that God, despite that original incapacity of man, nevertheless chose to give him moral laws and to forgive him all transgressions in consideration of his *Son* (i.e., in consideration of the independently existing sum of all his perfections, compared with which, and in which, every imperfection of the individual disappears), rather than not to give him those laws, and thus to exclude him from all moral happiness, which is inconceivable without moral laws.

§ 76: Let it not be objected that such rational speculations on the mysteries of religion are forbidden. The



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word mystery signified, in the early days of Christianity, something quite different from what it means now; and the development of revealed truths into rational truths is absolutely necessary if the human race is to be helped at all by them. When they were revealed, they were certainly not yet rational truths; but were revealed in order to become such. They were like the result that the arithmetic teacher gives his pupils in advance so that they may direct themselves somewhat in calculation. If the pupils were satisfied with the result, they would never learn to calculate, and the intention with which the good master gave them the clue for their work would be frustrated.

§ 77: And why should not we, too, be guided by a religion whose historical truth, if you will, looks so dubious, to more precise and better conceptions of the divine being, of our own nature, and of our relations with God, which human reason would never have arrived at on its own?

§ 78: It is not true that speculation about these things has ever done harm and become detrimental to civil society. This reproach should not be aimed at the speculations, but at the folly and the tyranny of controlling them, at people who did not allow men to exercise the speculations that they had.

§ 79: On the contrary, such speculations – whatever the result – are unquestionably the *most fitting* exercises of the human understanding, so long as the human heart, generally, is at best only capable of loving virtue for the sake of its eternal blessed consequences.

§ 80: For given this selfishness of the human heart, to wish to exercise the understanding only on those things that concern our corporal needs, would be to blunt rather than to sharpen it. It absolutely must be exercised on spiritual objects if it is to attain complete enlightenment and bring about that purity of heart which qualifies us to love virtue for its own sake.

§ 81: Or shall the human race never reach these highest levels of enlightenment and purity? - Never?

§ 82: Never? – Let me not think such blasphemy, all-bountiful one! Education has its goal for the race no less than for the Individual. That which is educated is educated for something.

§ 83: The flattering prospects which are suggested to the youth, the honor and prosperity one lures him with, what are they but means of educating him to become a man who, even in the absence of these prospects of honor and prosperity, shall still be capable of doing his duty?

§ 84: If this is the aim of human education, should not divine education reach as far? What art succeeds in doing for the individual, should not nature succeed in doing for the whole? Blasphemy! Blasphemy!!

§ 85: No; it will come, it will surely come, the time of fulfillment, when man, the more convinced his reason is of an ever better future, will nevertheless have no need to borrow motives for his actions from this future; when he will do good because it is good, not because it is tied to arbitrary rewards that were previously intended merely to fix and strengthen his unsteady gaze, so that he recognizes the inner, better, rewards of doing good.

§ 86: It will surely come, the time of a *new eternal Gospel*, which is promised us in the primer of the New Covenant itself!

§ 87: Perhaps even certain enthusiasts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries caught a glimpse of a beam of this new eternal Gospel, and erred only in proclaiming that its dawning was so near.

§ 88: Perhaps their three *ages of the world* were not just empty speculation after all, and they surely had no evil intentions when they taught that the New Covenant must become just as *antiquated* as the Old. For them, too, it was always the same economy of the same God. It was always – to use my own words – the same plan for the universal education of the human race.

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§ 89: Except, they were too hasty and believed that, without enlightenment, without preparation, they could make their contemporaries, who had scarcely outgrown their childhood, into men worthy of their *third age*.

§ 90: And that was the very thing that made them enthusiasts. The enthusiast often casts very accurate glances into the future, but he cannot wait for this future to come. He wishes this future accelerated, and accelerated through him. That for which nature takes millennia is to mature in the moment of his existence. For what good does it do him if what he recognizes as better does not become better in his lifetime? Will he come back? Does he believe he will come back? It is odd that this enthusiasm does not become more fashionable again among enthusiasts alone.

§ 91: Go thine inscrutable way, eternal providence! Only let me not despair in Thee, because of this inscrutableness. Let me not despair in Thee, even if Thy steps appear to me to be going backward. It is not true that the shortest line is always the straight one.

§ 92: Thou hast so much to carry with you on thine eternal way, so much to do! And what if it were as good as proven that the great, slow wheel that brings mankind nearer to this perfection is only put in motion by smaller, swifter wheels, each of which contributes its own individual share?

§ 93: It is so! The very same path by which the race reaches its perfection, must have been travelled – sooner or later – by every individual man. But can he have travelled it in one and the same life? Can he have been, in one and the same life, a sensual Jew and a spiritual Christian? Can he have moved beyond both in the same life?

§ 94: Surely not! – But why should every individual man not have existed more than once in this world?

§ 95: Is this hypothesis so laughable merely because it is the oldest? Because human reason, before the sophistries of the schools had dissipated and debilitated it, came to it right away?

§ 96: Why should I, too, not have already taken all the steps toward my perfection that mere temporal reward and punishments can lead man to make?

§ 97: And why, at another time, should I not have taken all the steps that the prospect of eternal rewards so powerfully induces us to take?

§ 98: Why should I not come back as often as I can to acquire new knowledge, new skills? Do I take away so much at once that there is no point in making the effort to come back?

§ 99: Shall I not come back for this reason? – Or is it because I forget that I have already been here? It is just as well that I do forget. The memory of my former condition would permit me to make only a bad use of the present one. And does that which I must forget have to be forgotten forever?

§ 100: Or shall I not come back because so much time would be lost? – Lost? – And what do I have to lose? Is not all of eternity mine?

## NOTES

[1] William Warburton (1698–1779). English literary critic and churchman, Bishop of Gloucester from 1759. In *Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist* (1737–41), “Warburton argues that both the Jews’ special protection by Divine Providence and the truth of Christian revelation can be ascertained by the Jews having a strong social morality without any doctrine of future rewards or punishments, and by Moses’s having failed to disseminate the concept of eternal life among his people.” (quoted in: Simon During, *Church, State, and Modernization: English Literature as Gentlemanly Knowledge after 1688*. Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture, vol.

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37, 2008.

Source of original German text: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1777). Hamburg: Hamburger Kulturverlag, 1948, pp. 35–60.

Translation: redacted from various translations by GHDI staff. Translations consulted include: *Literary and Philosophical Essays: French, German and Italian. With Introductions and Notes*, translated by F. W. Robertson. New York: Collier, the Harvard Classics, 1910, and *Lessing's Education of the Human Race*, translated by John Dearling Haney. New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 1908.

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