WILLIAM GODWIN’S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT:
BETWEEN REPUBLICANISM AND ANARCHISM

Abstract:
This paper seeks to engage critically with Godwin’s writings on education and consider their relationship with his anarchism and its expression in a distinctly republican late eighteenth century idiom. In doing so, I will not only tackle Godwin’s views on the organization of education in relation with the state – which are well known, and already developed in Political Justice – but more particularly with his understanding of the political relation between the parent or tutor and the child, as he develops it in several essays included The Enquirer, and, later, in his children’s books (following the groundbreaking work of Clemit, 2001). I argue that Godwin’s arguments about the tutor-child relationship in The Enquirer constitute an attempt to resolve the tension between, on the one hand, the moral equality of children and adults, and on the other, the potentially and perhaps inescapably despotic authority that parents and teachers have over children. Godwin’s suggestion, I contend, takes the form of a kind of ‘republican-constitutional’ order put in place and maintained by the parent or tutor, where the freedom of the child is maximised within clearly established boundaries and in a spirit of transparency, mutual respect and what Godwin calls “reverence,” to the child. This is then depicted as mutually beneficial for at least two reasons: first, it empowers the child; second it minimizes the noxious effects on the parent or tutor of the habitual exercise of arbitrary authority.
INTRODUCTION

It has not been unusual to consider the eighteenth-century radical author William Godwin as part of the anarchist canon – at least since Kropotkin’s inclusion of the writer in his article on anarchism in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.¹ Often enough, it is a pious invocation of a forefather of the later doctrine.² Godwin may otherwise be seen as somewhat passé but nevertheless be used to emphasise the link between rationalism and anarchism, when that is viewed as a specifically desirable trait.³ Of modern (British) anarchists, it is perhaps Colin Ward who has most positively written of William Godwin, and emphasised a trait that is not always – indeed not even often – the most apparent in anarchist discussions of the author of the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*: education. He approvingly cites Godwin in *Talking Schools*,⁴ and joins him to Mary Wollstonecraft as one of the crucial sources of his educational thought in *Influences*.⁵ In the *Very Short Introduction* to Anarchism, he repeats his main point: that Godwin’s ideas on education are worthy of notice, and were far ahead of their time, and possibly still of ours.⁶ Recent work on anarchism and education often mentions Godwin, either in the context of the critique of state-controlled education, and sometimes more broadly in that of the development of child-centred education. However, the engagement is often not particularly sustained. Judith Suissa, for example, acknowledges some of Godwin’s contribution, but barely discusses him, preferring to tackle later anarchists, and especially those coming from the socialist traditions.⁷ Several of the articles collected in *Anarchist Pedagogies* similarly mention Godwin, but do not pay close attention to the articulation of his positions, especially regarding the child’s freedom.

In this paper, then, I will pick up where Ward left off, so to speak, and examine the specifically political Godwin’s views on education in more detail. In doing so, I will briefly re-state Godwin’s now well-known three-fold argument against state-controlled education (section I). Of more interest to me however is Godwin’s articulation of the child’s freedom in relation to the tutor or parent, given Godwin’s scathing assertion in *The Enquirer* (1797) that “all education is despotism.”⁸

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⁷ Judith Suissa, *Anarchism and Education a Philosophical Perspective* (Oakland, CA: PM, 2010).
⁸ William Godwin, *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), vol. 5, p. 107. For the rest of this paper, references to this collection of Godwin’s works will be made in text as follows: (PPW [volume number]:[page number]).
particular, I want to show (1) how Godwin constructs a ‘political theory’ of education, centred on
the child-tutor relationship (section II); (2) how he considers teaching practices in this context
(section III); and (3) the ‘constitutional’ model with which Godwin attempts to solve the problem of
authority, which Judith Suissa rightly considers central to an anarchist account of educational theory
(section IV).9 I will end this account with a brief exploration of Godwin’s own practice as an
educator in the early nineteenth century, following Pamela Clemit’s example (section V). There, I
show how Godwin’s commitment to the child’s autonomy is embodied in the children’s books he
wrote.10

I. THE STATE AND EDUCATION
In the late eighteenth century, the question of national education was broached in intellectual
circles, and advocated by political liberals and republicans. As Colin Ward reminds us, it was
forcefully embraced in France by Condorcet and Helvétius, who both inspire Godwin’s thought.11 In
Britain, we find in Mary Wollstonecraft an advocate of a national, mixed gender scheme for
education.12 In response to these, in continuity with his advocating a gradual “euthanasia of
government” (PPW 4:114), and following broader concerns of the non-conformists in the late
eighteenth century,13 Godwin submits an argument against national education that occupies a full
chapter of the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793, revised 1796 and 1798). His argument is
threefold though all strands of the argument come together to bolster Godwin’s main claim: that
national education would hinder rather than accelerate social and political progress.

The first point concerns what he sees as the inherent scientific and political conservatism of “public
institutions.” They are designed to repeat established positions and to diffuse them in the rest of
society. Though public establishments and national schools may in the best case “diffuse whatever
of advantage to society is already known […], they forget that more remains to be known.” They
dwell on accepted knowledge without allowing for sufficient critical review of that knowledge. As a
consequence, they slow down course of social progress. This is compounded by the fact that

9 Suissa, Anarchism and Education a Philosophical Perspective, 16–17.
11 Ward, Influences, 28; On Helvétius and Godwin, see: Sophie Audidière, “Réforme Politique et Éducation,”
12 See chapter 12 of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman in Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of
Men ; A Vindication of the Rights of Woman ; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution, ed. Janet M.
13 On Godwin’s debt to radical Dissent, see: Mark Philp, Godwin’s Political Justice (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University
received knowledge is often linked to social servility: as pupils learn to defer to the authorities they are taught, they learn to defer to “every man in a handsome coat” (PPW 3:357-358). Godwin’s second argument is both individualistic and psychological in nature. Put briefly, it is that national education, as a form of mass education, cannot be attentive to individual interests or responsive to the specific individual incentives to teach and learn. What follows, for Godwin, is that national education would lead to a generalisation of the “formal dulness” he finds in “universities and expensive establishments,” and not social progress (PPW 3:358).

Godwin’s third and final argument against national education is at once fundamentally linked to his Dissenting background, and to his first, broader argument concerning “public institutions.” At the same time, it is also perhaps the most directly anarchistic point he makes in the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice on the subject of education. For Godwin, the “alliance” of state and education is “of a more formidable nature, than the old and much contested alliance of church and state.” As the joining of church and state had allowed the government to perpetuate and justify itself on religious grounds, Godwin warns that “Government will not fail to employ [the national education system] to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions.” Thus, the conservatism that is generally implied in “public institutions” (following Godwin’s first argument) would become considerably more problematic in the hands of government, as state education would lead “youth […] to venerate the constitution” rather than “truth” (PPW 3:359). The consequence, again, is that the progress of humanity will be slowed, and the emergence of an anarchist political order – the only one fully compatible with Godwin’s conception of justice – would be delayed.

In Political Justice, Godwin’s main concern is to clarify the relationship between the individual, society, government or the state, and justice. As a consequence, education and a detailed account of its practices and micro-political problems are not of interest to Godwin. However, he had tackled these issues in 1783, long before writing Political Justice, as he was looking to reconvert from Dissenting minister to schoolteacher. After the significant blowback against radicals and reformers in the aftermath of the French revolution, perhaps seeing only in the upcoming generations the source of political progress, he returned to these questions in The Enquirer, a collection of essays or “reflections on education, manners, and literature.” It is in these essays that Godwin seeks to reconfigure the tutor-child relationship, and in so doing tackles issues that are central to an anarchist philosophy of education.
II. A POLITICAL THEORY OF THE PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP

As any story about education, Godwin’s analysis of the tutor-child relationship is a story of hierarchy and differentials of power. It could be argued that this is an anachronistic claim, since we should not presume that late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth century thinkers identified the tutor-child relationship as political on such grounds. In the case of Godwin, we must understand it this way for the simple reason that he uses a deeply and fundamentally political language to describe and evaluate this relationship. Perhaps unsurprisingly given Godwin’s own political affiliations, in *The Enquirer*, Godwin uses a vocabulary closely associated with republicanism and its criticism of arbitrary power to describe the tutor-child relationship. For example, in the essay “Of Public and Private Education,” Godwin claims that:

> all education is despotism. It is perhaps impossible for the young to be conducted without introducing in many cases the tyranny of implicit obedience. Go there; do that; read; write; rise; lie down; will perhaps for ever be the language addressed to youth by age (PPW 5:107).

This is not an isolated case. In the essay entitled “Of the Communication of Knowledge,” Godwin elaborates on the position of the instructor, which embodies a dual political problem of education. “Nothing can be more pitiable than the condition of the instructor in the present modes of education,” Godwin thus claims, “he is the worst of slaves. [...] He is regarded as a tyrant by those under his jurisdiction, and he is a tyrant.” (PPW 5: 117). A final example, emblematic of the politics of Godwin’s educational project as a whole appears in the final paragraph of an essay entitled “Of Manly Treatment and Behaviour,” where Godwin concludes that “the state of equality, which is the consummation of a just education should for ever be borne in mind” (PPW 5: 130-131).

It might be argued that it is not sufficient to show that Godwin describes and evaluates the tutor-child relationship in political terms to describe it as a political theory. Yet, as I will show in the following two sections, what Godwin is building is, in my view, a radical variety of republicanism, adapted for the purposes of education. What Godwin is fundamentally trying to do is to work out how to minimise the operation of the arbitrary power of the tutor over the child and consequently maximise the ability of the child to make his or her own choices. At the same time, this runs into a fundamentally crippling problem: parents and tutors have *de facto* large amounts of arbitrary power over children. There is an irresolvable tension between the temptation of the parent to deploy power and a political, ethical, psychological and pedagogical duty for the parent or tutor not to do so. To
put it in other words, Godwin, I think, suggests mimicking as far as possible egalitarian, ‘republican’, social relationships in a situation where a republican form of liberty is fundamentally compromised, since the proposition “all education is despotism” seems to me to hold true at all times for Godwin. Rather than emphasising the issue of liberty here, however, I will instead focus on two instances where Godwin discusses the operation of the arbitrary power of the tutor.

III. ‘PUBLIC’ AND ‘PRIVATE’ EDUCATION

Godwin’s first examination of the operation of arbitrary power in the tutor-child is found in his discussion of public and private education. It should be noted that in this instance, by public, Godwin does not mean national education. He means rather education in a group or class, with a teacher and not an individual private tutor. The disagreements regarding public and private education are an important aspect of the educational debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with an important part of the political radicals preferring private education, the major exception in this regard being of course Mary Wollstonecraft. Godwin differs from radicals who advocate private education, but does not find public education to be a panacea either. Still, in his essay “Of Public and Private Education,” he spends time arguing that out of these two available choices, public seems to be better than private. Godwin’s reasoning is especially politically charged when discussing this issue and it is indeed in the essay “Of Public and Private Education” that Godwin recognises that “all education is despotism” (PPW 5: 107). However, Godwin claims, public education appears to be less despotic than private education.

On the face of it, this seems somewhat counter-intuitive: would education with a private tutor not generally be more flexible, more malleable and less authoritarian than education in a classroom? Godwin’s answer is no, precisely because private education is such that the teacher is constantly in control of the child: the child therefore has no real sphere of independence. Shifting to a first person account, Godwin thus writes “under this slavery the mind pusillanimously shrinks. I am left alone with my tyrant, and am utterly hopeless and forlorn” (PPW 5:108). In contrast, public schooling allows for independence because the child knows its sufferings to be temporary and limited by “the discipline of a public school,” which is akin, Godwin continues, to “the inflexible laws of nature

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14 I will explore the question of the child’s liberty in relation to its education in the full chapter, but it is a question that has received some attention in, for example Pamela Clemit, “Godwin’s Educational Theory: The Enquirer,” Enlightenment and Dissent 12 (1993): 3–11; and Gary Handwerk, “‘Awakening the Mind’: William Godwin’s Enquirer,” in Godwinian Moments from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, ed. Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto, ON.: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 103–24.

15 For a broader discussion, see: Sophia Woodley, “‘Oh Miserable and Most Ruinous Measure’: The Debate Between Private and Public Education in Britain, 1760-1800,” in Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain: Beliefs, Cultures, Practices, ed. Mary Hilton and Jill Shefrin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 21–39.
and necessity” (PPW 5: 108). The child can therefore think to itself: “I adjust the account in my own mind with my task-master, and say, Thus far you may proceed; but there is a conquest that you cannot atchieve [sic]” (PPW 5: 108). What appears to differentiate public and private education, then, is the nature of the controlling power that is erected over the child.

In the case of private education, the arbitrariness of the master’s power is immediate, raw, visible, tangible, and simply involves two minds, one oppressing, the other resisting oppression. In the case of a public school, however, oppression is shared and divided, and the discipline is (more or less) uniform and repetitive: it becomes a kind of temporary “law of nature,” which all pupils can recognise as such, and loses, therefore, a key part of its arbitrariness. To put it another way, whereas in private education the child is essentially a slave, in public education the child is at liberty to act according to its own will within the bounds of the (man-made) “law of nature” of the school. The independent mind of the child can, as a consequence, continue to grow without being completely swallowed by the petty control of the private tutor over the child’s every move.

Moreover, Godwin argues, there is an element of society, combined with equal recognition within members of that society of pupils in public education that is crucial for the development of a child’s psychology, and which is a consequence of the uniformity of the operation of power on all children in the school. It is because “I [as a pupil among others] have companions in the house of my labour,” Godwin claims, that “my mind begins to erect itself,” and therefore “I do not feel annihilated by my condition, but find that I am also something” (PPW 5: 108). An understanding of mutual equality within the school’s discipline, therefore, creates the conditions in which the child can have a sphere of independence within the school itself, where “the master is placed in too distant a sphere for me to enter into contention with him. I live in a little world of my own of which he is no member” (PPW 5:108).

While one might consider that this readily excuses on stoic grounds the most authoritarian school practices, this should be taken in the general context of the thrust of Godwin’s discussion of education in The Enquirer, “the state of equality [between tutor and child], which is the consummation of a just education should for ever be borne in mind” (PPW 5: 130-131). Furthermore, it should be reiterated that Godwin suggests at the end of his essay that neither public nor private education are satisfactory in themselves. “Perhaps an undaunted philosophy,” Godwin concludes somewhat prophetically, “would lead to the rejecting them [public and private education] altogether, and pursuing the investigation of a mode totally dissimilar” (PPW 5:109). Yet, even an
educational system based on the best of intentions, centred around the child and its desires, and considering the child as a soon-to-be equal human being comes with permanent dangers Godwin is well aware of; it is to this problem that I now turn.

IV. A CONSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF EDUCATION?

In an essay entitled “Of Reasoning and Contention,” Godwin suggests that a parent or tutor would be well-advised to attempt to “act the part of” the child’s “friend” rather than their “master” (PPW 5: 121). For him, this simply implies treating the child as an independent moral agent with the ability to reason and discuss. In short, it is to treat the child as a moral equal in all kinds of interactions, and particularly in conversations. However, he sees a fundamental pitfall here, which has to do on the one hand, with the parent or tutor’s constant ability (and ease) to turn to the use of arbitrary power, and on the other, with the difference in age and the subsequent rigidity of the opinions of the parent or tutor. Thus, while the enlightened parent leaves room for the child to present his or her case in a discussion on any subject, eventually, their structural position is such that they may, and in fact often will say “you [child] have not convinced me; and therefore nothing remains for you but to submit” (PPW 5: 122). This is especially the case given that the rigidity of the tutor’s opinions is such that, while “the child may be unprejudiced and open to conviction” the parent, bringing “a judgment already formed” leaves only “a small chance that the arguments of the child will be able to change it” (PPW 5:122).

Godwin suggests here extremely provocatively that the politics of such a situation are even worse than certain forms of slavery: not only is the child a slave under the arbitrary power of the tutor or parent, but it has also been placed in a position where freedom was tangible if illusory. “This”, Godwin writes “is a torture more exquisite and refined than all that Sicilian tyrants ever invented”. Godwin’s solution here is in my view an adaptation of a political institution: the constitution, or perhaps more precisely, the law. He does not use that analogy himself in The Enquirer, but the implications of Godwin’s discussion echo those of the Account of the Seminary in 1783, where he did make use of markedly republican language and commonplaces, claiming that in education, “the laws should speak, and the magistrate be silent” (PPW 5: 13). In any case, Godwin calls for the independence of the child to be maintained, but within boundaries that “should be clear, evident and unequivocal”. Within these limits, the child would be completely free to act according to his or her own will; this would be the case, in principle, in a public school, as we have seen above. On the flip-side, however, “controversy into matters that will probably at last be decided from authority” should be discouraged as they would only create the illusion of freedom.
In other words, while some amount of arbitrary power is, according to Godwin, “for the present at least […], indispensable”, its mode of operation should become clear to the understanding of the child. In this way, just like in the case of public schooling, the child can function independently because they understand the limits of their independence and abide by them “in the same spirit as they submit to the laws of inanimate necessity.” Furthermore, and again, echoing the public/ private education discussion, Godwin suggests that while boundaries to the child’s actions follow from the operation of the arbitrary power of the tutor or parent, they are no longer to be perceived as such by the child who understands them. Instead, they are understood as the natural (though man-made) limits of the child’s space of freedom. As a consequence, they lose an important nefarious political aspect of their arbitrariness.

V. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: GODWIN AS A CHILDREN’S BOOK AUTHOR

In this final section, I want to illustrate how Godwin practised as a children’s book author some of what he preached as an essayist and philosopher. As a children’s book author, and particularly as the author of a textbook on British history, Godwin thus embodied the role of teacher, historian, and political, and pedagogical thinker all at once. In writing the History of England for his own business, the Juvenile Library, Godwin tried to produce books that would at once foster the autonomy of the child – a crucial dimension of his pedagogical thought – and re-negotiate the teacher/narrator-child relationship, following some of the positions I have outlined above. To do this, I build on the insights into the connections between format, style, and Godwin’s pedagogical views that characterise Pamela Clemit’s article on the Juvenile Library, “Philosophical Anarchism in the Schoolroom.”

Clemit notes that Godwin's History of England, “published in a duodecimo format (about 8.5×14 cm)”, is therefore “small enough to fit into a child's hands.” In addition, it has “clear, well-spaced print”, making it easier to read for a child. She goes on to suggest that this format was intended “to encourage independent reading”. Thus, Godwin's choice of format, Clemit argues, is correlated with his views on education and the individuality and autonomy of the child. While this is perfectly plausible, and indeed, in my view, quite likely, the evidence based on the book’s format is not sufficient to assert that Godwin was in fact doing what Clemit thinks he does. After all, the small duodecimo was not an uncommon format for children’s books, most likely due to the fact that it

16 For more insights on this issue, see: Ward, Influences, 37–42; Clemit, “Godwin's Educational Theory: The Enquirer”; Ward, Tailing Schools, 11; Handwerk, “‘Awakening the Mind’: William Godwin’s Enquirer.”
could be sold cheaply. It was indeed used by Godwin’s competitors who did not often believe in any his educational doctrines.

However, the style of Godwin’s *History of England*, offers additional evidence. Godwin's view was generally that books for children is that they should be written in a “mode of familiar and playful writing”, as this fosters the child's imagination by touching his or her “passions.”\(^{18}\) Familiar style was not unusual in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century children’s books however – yet the way that other authors deploy familiarity could reinforce rather than diminish narrative authority. The staging of the familiar conversation in George Davys's *Plain and Short History of England*, for instance, enables the writer to take a particularly authoritative voice as it plays, and hinges, on a particular kind of traditionally hierarchical relationship: that between a father and his son. Godwin's familiar tone is of a different kind, allowing the reader to construct a more equal relationship with the narrator/teacher – despite the difference in knowledge – and allows for a more open-ended reading of the *History of England*.

The feeling of relative equality, and of the relative autonomy of the child reader is further reinforced by Godwin's use of open questions, which is somewhat unusual for the time. Authors like Davys adduced closed, narrowly factual questions, to their text, in order for teachers to verify that their pupils retained the necessary amount of details. In contrast, Godwin presents his child-reader with much more open questions that do not refer back to a fundamentally correct answer to be found within the text and learned by rote. For example, in a hardly politically innocent question following a discussion of British imperial conquests and losses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Godwin writes:

> While we lost an empire in the West, we gained one in the East Indies: Which was most worth having? The colonies of America were too large and too distant for us to hope to retain them long in subjection: yet they had English feelings and spoke the English language: the inhabitants of our East-India dominions (much larger than these) are Hindoos and Moors, speaking the Hindoo, the Arabic or the Persion, and can be kept in subjection only by the sword.\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) Baldwin [William Godwin], *The History of England. For the Use of Schools and Young Persons*, 180–81.
It may (or may not) have been that the conclusion Godwin hoped the child would reach is that neither of these colonial empires are actually “worth having,” however, Godwin's answer is not obviously available to the reader in the narrative. Thus, unlike the questions in Davys's text, Godwin's question here requires the child-readers to think about what could be the just answer. To put it another way, it forces the child to go outside of the text, and appeals to his or her private judgment and reasoning ability. These are two characteristics we know Godwin values highly not only intrinsically, but also for the for their capacity to foster progressive political change.

VI. CONCLUSION

With this paper, I have tried to follow up on Colin Ward’s encouragement to look to Godwin for insights in educational thought, by articulating what Godwin was doing in both his educational theory and his educational practice. To do this, I have worked with three different texts that illustrate the different levels of analysis for educational thought. At the macro-level, following Godwin’s arguments in the Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, we have seen the articulation of an anarchist (or possibly, more broadly, libertarian) critique of state controlled education, and the establishment of a national system of education. At the interpersonal level, which Godwin explores in The Enquirer, I have shown how Godwin developed a ‘political theory’ governing the tutor-child relationship. With this analysis, Godwin tried to identify methods and institutions through which the de facto despotic authority of the parent or tutor over the child could be mitigated. In the last section, I have tried to show how Godwin – more or less successfully – managed to implement his commitment to the child’s autonomy, while intervening in an existing children’s book market.

If we are serious in considering Godwin as expounding an early anarchist theory, couched in the republican idiom of non-domination, then it might also well be – as I hope I have indicated – that we should pay closer attention to the articulation of his thought. Perhaps we could even reintroduce some of Godwin’s arguments, or – more modestly – some of his modes of thought, in our own thinking about the ‘constitutionalisation of anarchist education.’