
FRANÇOIS DE FÉNELON

**APPRENTICE TO
A MASTER**

François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon (1651–1715) was a French priest, theologian, and author whose influential writing was at times quite controversial. Born to an aristocratic but impoverished family in Périgord, Fénelon was ordained a priest in 1675 and became Archbishop of Cambrai in 1695. His various ministries included teaching women and ex-Huguenots newly converted to Catholicism, supporting liberal education for the former in his treatise, *On the Education of Girls* (1687). His letters of spiritual counsel are still highly valued today.

In 1689, Fénelon was appointed tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, the grandson of Louis XIV, whom he taught for ten years, preparing the young duke for the crown he stood to inherit. For his royal charge, Fénelon wrote a number of works, including *Fables*, *Dialogues of the Dead*, and *Telemachus*, with the aim of training up a moderate and enlightened successor to his extravagant and despotic grandfather, Louis XIV. The Sun King, however, preferred the absolutist counsel of Fénelon's famous rival bishop, J.B. Bossuet. Louis saw *Telemachus* as an attack on his court and immediately dismissed Fénelon as tutor on its publication. Any hopes of this early training changing the governing of France in the future were dashed by the premature death of the Duke of Burgundy in 1712.

Fénelon himself died just three years later, banished by the court, condemned by Rome, and exiled in his own diocese. Though *Telemachus* contributed to Fénelon's downfall, it was spectacularly successful and became the most-read literary work in eighteenth-century France, after the Bible. Had the Bourbons followed Fénelon, not Bossuet, there would likely have been no French revolution, and the history of the world would not have been the same.

"Mentoring" has often become an empty cliché today. It survives best in the robust practice of coaching in sports, but its deepest roots lie in the models of tutoring and apprenticeship demonstrated by Socrates and Plato and supremely Jesus and his disciples. The central idea? The deepest things in life cannot be taught in words (or books, lectures, seminars, and sermons). They must be learned in experience under the authority of a Master.

Fénelon's is the most systematic development of this notion, despite oddities in his version. He is a Christian, but his Mentor is the pre-Christian goddess Minerva in male disguise. Therefore the content of the counsel and the omniscient source from which it springs are hardly a model for today. But the role of Mentor in this crucial stage of Odysseus' son Telemachus is both touching, telling, and instructive.

Telemachus is the story of the moral and political education of a young man by a wise and virtuous tutor. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus is the son of Odysseus (or Ulysses, the Roman name used in this translation), the wisest of the Greek heroes of the Trojan war, who providentially vanishes between Book 5 and Book 15. Fénelon's *Telemachus* is an imaginative filling in of those ten books.

Why I Wrote It

"As for *Télémaque*, it is a fabulous narration in the form of an heroic poem like those of Homer and Virgil, into which I have put the main instructions which are suitable for a young prince whose birth destines him to rule . . . In these adventures I have put all the truths necessary to government, and all the faults that one can find in sovereign power."
—François Fénelon in a letter to Father LeTellier

We Must Graduate

"One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil." —Friedrich Nietzsche,
Ecce Homo

Telemachus

"I am fully persuaded that the most important point in government is to discern well the different characters of men, and to employ them according to their talents."

During the voyage, Telemachus said to Mentor: ". . . I am fully persuaded that the most important point in government is to discern well the different characters of men, and to employ them according to their talents: but how such discernment is to be acquired, is what I am at a loss to know."

Mentor thus replied: "To know men you must not only study them, but keep their company and deal with them. Kings ought to converse with their subjects, make them speak, consult them, and test them by inferior employments, of which they should exact an account, in order to discover whether they are qualified for higher functions. How was it, my dear Telemachus, that you learned in Ithaca to know the nature of horses? Was it not by seeing them often, and having their excellencies and defects pointed out to you by persons of experience and skill? Just in the same manner, in order to know men, you must talk about their good and bad qualities with other wise and virtuous men, who have long studied their characters; thus you will insensibly become acquainted with them, and be able to judge what you have to expect from their qualifications. What was it that taught you to distinguish between good and bad poets? Was it not the frequent reading of them, and talking of them with those who had a taste for poetry? What was it that made you a judge of music? Was it not your diligent attention to the performances of good musicians? How can any prince hope to govern a nation well, if he is ignorant of human nature? And how can he avoid being ignorant of it, unless he lives with men? It is not living with them to see them in public, where nothing is said on either side, but unimportant trifles, or the language of art and premeditation; it is a matter of visiting them in private, to trace all the secret springs that move their hearts; to probe them on every side; and even relieve their wants, in order to discover their maxims. But to be able to form a sound judgment of men, you must begin with knowing what they ought to be; you must know in what true and solid merit consists, so that you may be capable of distinguishing between those who are possessed of it, and those who do not have it.

"People are continually talking of virtue and merit, without having any clear ideas of them. In the mouths of most men they are only fine words without any determinate meaning. . . .

"Learn then, my dear Telemachus, learn to know mankind; examine them, make them talk of one another, and prove them by little and little: but repose no blind confidence in any. . . .

"To be able to form a sound judgment of men, you must begin with knowing what they ought to be; you must know in what true and solid merit consists, so that you may be capable of distinguishing between those who are possessed of it, and those who do not have it."

[At the end of the book, Mentor discloses that he is the goddess Minerva in disguise and addresses Telemachus one last time.]

At last Minerva addressed him thus: "Son of Ulysses, hear me once more, and for the last time. I never took so many pains to instruct any mortal as you. I have led you by the hand through shipwrecks, unknown lands, bloody wars, and all the disasters that the heart of man can encounter. I have shown you by facts, of which you were a witness, the consequences of the true and false maxims adopted in government: and your errors have been no less serviceable to you than your misfortunes. For, who is the man that can pretend to rule a people wisely, who has never suffered, nor ever profited by the sufferings which his errors have occasioned?"

"Like your father, you have filled both sea and land with your sad adventures. Go, you are now worthy of having him for your model; the passage is short and easy from here to Ithaca, where he has just now arrived. Assist him against his enemies, and be as submissive and obedient to him, as if you were the meanest of his subjects, setting thereby an example to others. He will give you Antiope, in whom you will be happy, as having been captivated less by her beauty, than her wisdom and virtue.

"When you ascend the throne, let the great object of your ambition be to renew the golden age. Let your ears be open to everyone, but let your confidence be confined to a few. Beware of trusting too much to your own judgment, and thereby deceiving yourself: but when you have committed a mistake, do not be afraid that it should be known.

"Love your people, and neglect nothing that may tend to conciliate their affection. Fear, indeed, is necessary, where love is wanting; but, like violent dangerous remedies, it ought never to be employed but where necessity compels.

"Always weigh beforehand the consequences of everything you undertake. Endeavor to foresee the greatest misfortunes that may happen; and know that true courage consists in viewing danger at distance, and despising it, when it cannot be avoided: for he that avoids thinking of it before, it is to be feared will not have courage to support the sight of it when present; whereas he who foresees all that can happen, who prevents all that can be prevented, and calmly encounters what cannot be avoided, alone deserves the character of wise and magnanimous.

"Guard against effeminacy, ostentation, and profusion; and account it your glory to maintain a simplicity of manners. Let your virtues and your good actions be the ornaments of your person and palace, and your guards. Let all the world learn from you wherein true honor consists; and remember always that kings are not promoted to the throne to gratify their own ambition, but for the good of their people; that the good they do extends to very remote ages, and that the ill goes on continually increasing to latest posterity. A weak or vicious reign often entails misery on several generations.

"Above all, be upon your guard against your own humor and caprice, which is an enemy that will never quit you till death, but will intrude into your counsels and betray you, if you listen to its suggestions. It often occasions the loss of the most valuable opportunities; it engenders childish inclinations and aversions, to the prejudice of the most important considerations; and makes the most frivolous reasons determine the greatest affairs. It disgraces a man's talents, and his courage, and makes him appear unequal, weak, contemptible, and insupportable. Beware, therefore, O Telemachus, of such an enemy.

"Who is the man that can pretend to rule a people wisely, who has never suffered, nor ever profited by the sufferings which his errors have occasioned?"

"Let your ears be open to everyone, but let your confidence be confined to a few. Beware of trusting too much to your own judgment, and thereby deceiving yourself: but when you have committed a mistake, do not be afraid that it should be known."

"Endeavor to foresee the greatest misfortunes that may happen; and know that true courage consists in viewing danger at distance, and despising it, when it cannot be avoided."

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“Fear the gods, O Telemachus. Such fear is the greatest treasure the heart of man can be possessed of: by it you will obtain wisdom, virtue, peace, joy, genuine pleasures, true liberty, sweet plenty, and unspotted glory.

“I am now going to leave you, son of Ulysses; but my wisdom shall never leave you, provided you always retain a due sense of your inability to do anything well without it. It is now time that you should try to walk alone. The reason for my parting with you in Egypt and at Salente was to accustom you, by degrees, to be without me, as children are weaned, when it is time to take them from the breast, and give them more solid food.”

No sooner had the goddess spoken these words, than she ascended into the air, enveloped in a cloud of gold and azure, and disappeared. Telemachus, overwhelmed with grief, wonder, and astonishment, lifted up his hands to heaven, and threw himself prostrate on the ground: then he went and waked the ship’s crew, commanded them to put to sea immediately, arrived at Ithaca, and found his father at the house of the faithful Eumeus.

From François de Fénelon, *Telemachus*, edited and translated by Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

No Wonder Louis XIV was Annoyed

“It is with sadness that I feel myself constrained to tell you hard things; but shall I betray you by concealing the truth from you? Put yourself in my place. If you have been deceived up till now, it is because you wanted to be; it is because you have feared advisors who were too sincere. Have you sought after people who were the most disinterested, and the most likely to contradict you . . . to condemn your passions and your unjust feelings? . . . No, no: let us see whether you will now have to the courage to be humiliated by the truth which condemns you.

“ . . . You have exhausted your riches; you have never thought of augmenting your people, nor of cultivating fertile lands. Was it not necessary to view these two things as the two essential foundations of your power—to have many good people, and well-cultivated lands to nourish them? It would require a long peace to favor the multiplication of your people. You should never think of anything but agriculture and the establishment of the wisest laws. A vain ambition has pushed you to the very edge of the precipice. By virtue of wanting to appear great, you have let yourself ruin your true greatness. Hasten to repair these faults; suspend all your great works; renounce the display which would ruin your new city; let your people breathe in peace.”

—Mentor’s speech to King Idomeneus of Salente,
whose misrule of Crete had caused him to be deposed and
exiled from that island, from Fénelon’s *Telemachus*

“The good historian is not from any time or any country; while he loves his fatherland he never flatters it in anything. The French historian must make himself neutral between France and England. . . .”

—François Fénelon,
Lettre sur les occupations de l’Académie Française

“All these [ancient] legislators and philosophers who reasoned about laws presupposed that the fundamental principle of political society was that of preferring the public to the self—not through hope of serving one’s own interests, but through the simple, pure disinterested love of the political order, which is beauty, justice, and virtue itself.”

—Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Economie politique*,
echoing Fénelon’s notion of disinterested public service

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. In the opening paragraph, what does Telemachus say is the “most important point in government”? Why would this be so? What concerns him about this point?
 2. What is Mentor’s answer to Telemachus? How is his response a challenge to the way a king (or a political leader) might choose to interact with his subjects? To what areas of Telemachus’ life and experience does Mentor point where this method of learning and discernment has been successful and valuable?
 3. In the first paragraph in which Mentor addresses Telemachus as Minerva, she recounts the history of his tutelage. What does this say of the depth of Mentor’s involvement in Telemachus’ training? What does she say of his errors? What do you think of this? How would these experiences and her perspective on them prepare him for future errors he might make as king? What does she say he is now ready for?
 4. How would you characterize Minerva’s last words of advice to Telemachus? What areas of his life does she address?
 5. Read the paragraph, “Always weigh beforehand the consequences . . .” How is this advice a continuation of his experience of being tutored? What would following this advice—or not—mean for fulfilling one’s calling?
 6. In the next paragraph, “Guard against . . .”, Minerva addresses some character issues. What are they? Why is it important for leaders to be of good character? She says, “A weak or vicious reign often entails misery on several generations.” What do you think? Where in history have you seen evidence to this fact?
 7. What is the “enemy that will never quit you till death”? How would a leader guard against such an enemy?
 8. What is your experience of being tutored/mentored/coached? And of being a tutor/mentor/coach? What difference has this relationship made for the student/apprentice? For the tutor? For the leadership or responsibility for which the young person is being prepared?
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