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476

Habit in its Relation to Thought

C. W. Cummings

Habit in its Relation to Thought.

In the treatment of such abstract subjects as Habit and Thought we must define them in terms of what they do, in what results they produce rather than in what they are. For our purpose a Habit may be defined as an act which has been consciously performed so many times that it is at last able to go on of itself while the brain is engaged in other thought. But the knowledge or sensation that the act is going on ^{is present} in the brain. Thought or thinking is the process through which the mind passes in getting possession of an idea or for our purpose the process through which the brain passes before a given act is performed.

It can thus be seen that as

Habits are simply the results of Thought processes which engaged the whole attention of the brain at first and which through repetition became more or less automatic, and it is evident that the more such processes are automatic the more time and freedom is given to the brain for acquiring new ideas.

Walking is nothing but a habit which at first was performed only with great conscious effort and very difficult then became through practice very easy. Stories are told of soldiers who could walk and sleep at the same time and there is a story told of a discharged veteran in whom the force of habit was so strong that when some practical joker seeing him carrying his dinner, called out "attention" he instantly responded and lost his dinner in the gutter.

Dr. Maudsley says, "If an act became no easier after being done several times, if the careful direction of consciousness were necessary to its accomplishment on each occasion, it is evident that the whole activity of a lifetime might be confined to one or two deeds — that no progress could take place in development.

A man might be occupied all day in dressing and undressing himself; the attitude of his body would absorb all his attention and energy; the washing of his hands or the fastening of a button would be as difficult to him on each occasion as to the child on its first trial; and he would furthermore be completely exhausted by his exertions. Think of the pains necessary to teach a child to stand, of the many

efforts which it must make, and of the ease with which it at last stands, unconsciousness of any effort. For while secondarily automatic acts are accomplished with comparatively little weariness—in this regard approaching the organic movements—the Conscious effort of the will soon produces exhaustion."

The second practical effect of Habit is that it reduces the conscious attention with which our acts are performed. This may be stated in another way by saying that we always do the right thing at the right time and also the wrong thing if it be habitual, why we do not know.

This illustrates what an important part Habit plays in daily life and it is indeed fortunate for us that it does play such an important part as if it were otherwise the entire time and energies of the brain would be taken up with controlling the movements of the body. Through Habit we become accurate and sure in what we do and if such were not the case an action would be just as difficult to perform the thousandth time as the first.

One educator says. "Without Habit education would be impossible as every act would be a new one" If education would be impossible how could the race advance above the level it was created? Is Habit then, not the basis of education?

As Habits are simply Thought processes that have become automatic through repetition it is seen that we can either form a new Habit or break an old one if we compel ourselves to give attention to what we wish to become habitual and repeat the action often enough. And such is actually the case as anyone can prove for himself. It is simply a question of having will power sufficient to control the thoughts and having such thoughts as are related to the new idea that is to be formed.

How to change these thoughts with the least difficulty is a question that might be asked at this point. If we can present such a subject to the mind that we really feel an interest

in ourselves and if we realize that it is to our advantage to concentrate our minds upon it we can do so by the exercise of a little will-power.

The longer a Habit has been practiced the more difficult it becomes to break it until in very old people it is almost impossible and is often fatal or at least shortens life if a radical change be made. I once knew an old gentleman who had been a hard worker all his life and who was at last prevailed upon by his children to give up work entirely. After that he seemed to have nothing to live for and did not live long.

Small children on the other hand are continually making and breaking Habits and it

is a matter of very small difficulty to them.

The characteristic intellectual Habits peculiar to the individual do not become set until between the ages of twenty and thirty but the so-called personal Habits, vocalization, gesture, address etc. are formed before the age of twenty.

As this is the case it should be the aim of each young individual to make his nervous system as beneficial to him as possible and he can do this by making automatic and habitual as many useful actions as he can.

It is evident that the more of the details of daily life we can make automatic and in this way reduce the conscious attention to a minimum the more

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9

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time and energy we will have
to employ in any way we wish.

It can now be said that
Habit is something which pro-
duces the same result as thought
without requiring the conscious
attention of the brain and
reduces the amount of muscular
energy expended in the perform-
ance of the act to a minimum.

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