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Habit Transformation.

Graduating Thesis.

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"You cannot throw habit out of the window; it must be coaxed downstairs one step at a time." — Mark Twain.

If we fold a sheet of paper carefully, as to insert it into an envelope, and then unfold it, we find it impossible to smooth out the creases, we can let these creases represent good habits, for they serve a good purpose, they prepare the sheet of paper for the envelope. Now, if we fold another sheet irregularly — anyway, just so it is folded, we have more creases, just as persistent as the first, we can call these bad habits, for the paper will not fit into the envelope, the bad habits have the same natural tendency as the first, and will stay where they are.

From a physiological point of view, according to James, an acquired habit, is nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain by which certain incoming currents ever after escape. We find the laws of nature to be immutable habits, which the elementary sorts of matter follow in their actions and reactions upon each other. Just as it costs less effort to fold a paper when it has been folded once, just so in

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the nervous system, the impressions of outer objects fashion for themselves more and more appropriate paths. and these phenomena recur under similar excitements from without. A sprained ankle or broken arm are in danger of being sprained or broken again.

Habits are due to pathways through the nerve centres. Nature has so wrapped the brain that the only impressions that can be made upon it are through the blood on ^{the} one hand and the sensory nerve roots on the other. The currents pour into these channels, once in, they must find a way out, and in so doing they leave their traces in the paths which they make, they either deepen the old paths or make new ones. The simple habit of walking is nothing more than a reflex discharge, and its underlying anatomy must be a path in the system. The more complex habits are discharges linked together in the nerve centres, caused by the impression produced by one muscular contraction, serving as a stimulus to excite another, and so on until all are stirred up.

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Habit begins in childhood, the first efforts of the child to walk are very difficult, but the little fellow is persistent, and in a few months can walk with no effort or thought on his own part. The habit is fixed, and if he would try to resume consciousness into this habitual process it would tend to change his natural gait entirely, it would be difficult for him to maintain his equilibrium. So it is with every movement we make, if, in order to perform certain duties it was necessary for us to entirely concentrate our minds on them, it would take all our time to perform a single duty. Habit tends to simplify our movements, increasing speed and accuracy, and at the same time diminishes fatigue of labour.

One of the more important results is that through habit, the physiological organism is enabled to cope almost unaided with situations that originally required assistance of conscious processes, and consciousness is left to go free to go about other attainments,

which in their turn become habits, to be handed over to certain of the unconscious processes of the nervous system. Consciousness goes on in advance. We might describe the whole mental development as being made up of this process of acquiring habits, which, when once embedded in the nervous tissue, become in permanent possession of the individual.

As soon as a habit is formed, consciousness goes to other points where habitual accommodatory movements are wanting and are needed.

Without habit consciousness could never get beyond its daily routine, with habit it is able to gain victory after victory.

Habits are more easily formed among the young, also more easily changed. The period between twenty and thirty is the critical point in the formation of habits, the period below twenty is the most important for fixing personal habit. If a boy is brought up in the slums amidst poverty and rough companions and at the age of twenty is enriched and brought into society,

it will be impossible for him to abandon his motions and language learned in the streets, no tailor can make him look just like the society man that has been raised in society, no matter how much money he may have in his pocket, he cannot learn to dress like a society gentleman. We must make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy, to do this, as early as possible, we must make habitual, as many useful actions as we can.

How do men become drunkards, or slaves to the vices? Sometimes it is by inheritance, but oftener by forming the habit in early childhood and youth by sipping cider, wine or beer, acts repeated make a habit. No man ever becomes a drunkard by the first drink, it was keeping at it that made him a slave of the deadly poison.

"If we sow a thought we reap an act,
Sow an act and reap a habit.

Sow a habit we reap a character,

Sow a character and we reap a destiny.

Acts form habits, habits form character, and character tends certainly and swiftly to fixedness. When the plastic mind

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of the child and youth has hardened into the man of evil, it is almost impossible to change him, when he is old he will not turn from the way in which he was trained as a child. The folly of the child becomes the vice of the youth and then the crime of the man.

Thought can be said to be the underlying basis of all habit, we can again take as an example, the drunkard, one of the first indications of the diseased soul state is the retention of evil thoughts in the mind, with a continual brooding over them. The evil thoughts are imaginative associations, as the disease progresses these associations become real. Then he seeks the company of persons whose actions are vile, one by one he takes up their habits until he has acquired them as his own. An individual in good health, with good morals and a sober ancestry, was never known to become a habitual drunkard without first passing through the stages just cited. At first such a diseased soul is easily gratified, but if the cause is not sought out and removed it grows from day to day, until it requires more of the

evil to gratify it. Evil imaginative associations seem to form the first step in the downward course; These soon cease to gratify the diseased soul. He seeks other more vile associations which are real. The lighter narcotics are first employed. Perhaps he partakes of an occasional cigar, or becomes an "inveterate chewer" and the "cob pipe his best companion." For a time these satisfy the diseased soul, but, he soon becomes accustomed to them, the disease progresses, he takes one drink then another, frequently substituting the stronger alcoholic liquors, until finally nothing but pure alcohol will gratify him, with this comes many vices, as; gambling, poverty and degradation, crime and murder.

"Ill thoughts by degrees to habits rise;
Ill habits soon become exalted vice,
What more advance can mortals make
in sin
So near perfection, who with corrupt
thought begins?"

To leave off from an old habit, we must launch ourselves with a strong and decided initiative as possible.

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accumulate all possible circumstances that re-enforce the right motives. The resolution should be enveloped with every aid we know, everytime the habit is postponed, the less danger there is of its return.

Never let an exception occur until the new habit is firmly rooted, a single slip undoes more than a great many efforts can remedy. Every gain on the wrong side undoes the many conquests on the right. The opposing sides should be so regulated that they will not be interrupted, until fortified by repetition.

To abandon a habit, the "tapering off" method should never be used, but stop abruptly if the individual is able to stand it. There is a young lady of my acquaintance, who, when quite young acquired the tea habit, finally she decided to quit, at first she tried to stop abruptly, but as she sat down to the table and saw the others drinking, she would take just 'one more cup', finally she made up her mind to stop whatever the cost, the sight or smell of tea was so tempting and the longing so strong, that to resist was almost maddening, and the effect would last for

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hours; but each day the determination was made stronger, sometimes before thinking she would call for a cup of tea and even start to taste it, then the resolution came to her mind and the tea was pushed away. For weeks and even months she battled with it, until now, tea seems repulsive and sickening to her and the desire for it passed away.

We might take into consideration how the habit of breaking promises is acquired. In so doing, let us follow the child in his earliest education, in the home, and in the school to his entrance upon the active duties of life. The parent threatens the child with a punishment that is never inflicted; the teacher promises a reward that is never bestowed; the employer holds out a hope of advancement that never is realized. Then the child puts the same value upon a promise that his superiors did, and is soon copying their example. He says "I will surely be there at two o'clock," "I will certainly do that task tomorrow," "I will not leave the office until the floor is thoroughly swept."

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Promises so readily made are easily broken. It is very easy for him to step from these matters of lesser importance to matters of higher importance. The young man borrows money and promises to pay at a certain day, but the promise is forgotten and the day passes by. He promises to care for a destitute family, something else engages his attention, and his promise is thrown to the winds. The process of moral decay is a simple one. The man is not overpowered in a moment by a sudden temptation; the habit has grown with his years, until it has become a part of himself. No obligation now has binding authority. He breaks faith with himself, with fellow men, and with his maker. He takes upon himself vows, with little idea of their meaning, and with no conception of the sin of violating them. It is better to make fewer promises and keep them whatever the cost.

Housework may be made agreeable or disagreeable just as the housewife wishes, if she seeks to acquire a habit of cheerfulness, everything runs smoothly.

but should she choose the habit of grumbling and fault finding, how much harder she finds the task, It is just as easy to obtain a cheerful nature as it is to obtain a grumbly mood.

We should seize the opportunity to act on every resolution we make, and on every emotional prompting we may experience in the direction of the habit we wish to gain.

A man's strength or weakness lies in his habits of thinking and doing his habits reveal his character.

In conclusion, to break up a habit means not only to secure a penitent, reformatory attitude of mind, but a complete change in certain parts of the nervous tissue, which often proves very difficult. No amount of good resolutions can at once wipe out a habit of long standing.

Every young person should strive to make the body in which his habits are reserved, his friend and not his enemy. Every day our nervous tissue is storing up the result of our actions and we know not what time the

habit will grasp us with its firm grip which we cannot loosen. but if one at once gets under the sway of a habit, and wishes to escape from it, he must begin at once with all the determination he can possess, and not put it off until some more convenient time. Unless the result is apt to be disastrous, stop wholly, do not taper off. Give yourselves surroundings that will offer the least temptations, and put a good habit in its place whenever possible.

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