

Thesis.

The Peculiar Nature of Habit.

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References.

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Outline.

I. Introduction.

1. Definition.

II. Discussion.

1. Physiological Nature of Habit.
2. Habits in Childhood.
3. Habits in Youth.
4. Habits in Manhood.

III. Conclusion.

The Peculiar Nature of Habit.

Take pains in planting a tree so as to get it started to growing straight then bend it over, "It will not stay there," you say, this may represent good habits as it is a straight tree one would desire. Now then plant a tree so it will grow crooked then bend it up straight it will not stay there no more than the other would stay crooked, this may represent bad habits; we see that the crooked tree is as persistent as the straight one. That is good habits and bad habits have the same strong tendency toward their own individual course.

When we look at living creatures from the same outward point of view as the tree the first thing we see is that they are "bundles of habits", and these habits act in the same way as they did in these two different trees. The habits of wild animals that are implanted at birth are called instincts, while the habits of man are obtained

more from education and are called, by some, habits of reasoning. So we can see that the field of habit covers a very large part of life, and we are bound at the outset to clearly define our subject.

We may define habit as any act, physical or mental, upon repetition, to perform that act under similar circumstances that we had before. Further, any acts or series of acts which have been done in a given situation tend to be done again when the same situation recurs. In other words every time we perform any action, mental or physical, we have more inclination to and greater ease for the performance of that action under similar circumstances than we had before.

We have thus far simply defined habit regardless as to how it is acquired. From the physiological point of view, "an acquired habit is nothing but a new pathway of discharge formed in the brain, by which certain incoming currents ever after tend to escape."

This leads us into the physical nature of habit. Habit may be developed

into any animal that can be trained. If a dog has a certain dish in which it gets a drink it will always go to this dish for water. A flock of chickens that find a hole in the fence will tend to pass out this hole every time; many other examples of this kind might be mentioned.

The character of the organism seems to be modified to suit the new conditions in every habit. That is the nervous tissue is enriched with an extraordinary degree of "plasticity." ("Plasticity means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once") For an example, putty can be moulded into one form and then changed into another but will not change back into the first form. Each fixed phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits. And the law of habit in the living being is due to this plasticity of their organic bodies. So we see a habit is acquired through the nervous system, physical act accompanied by a

nerve-act or brain-act, which opens a "pathway" for the discharge of nerve-energy, and in this way our next act becomes easier.

Recent psychology has done much in calling attention to this plasticity of the nervous system early in life. So we will take up the nature of habit in childhood which to my mind is the most fundamental period in all life, for this is the time when the brain is more plastic.

Perez says, in the first three years of childhood, "The business of psychological educators is much more concerned with the habits that children may acquire, and with their wills, which are also developed by habitual practice than with the development of their moral conscience. The latter is the blossom which will be followed by fruit, but the former are the roots and branches."

As we remember from the introduction that it was the beginning that set the start of a good or a bad habit and we also saw ^{from} the nature of the two, that is they could not be fully erased. So it is

with the child, his first words in his learning to talk, stay with him. If he is taught to put things in place from the start it will become so natural that he will feel uneasy when there is anything in his sight that is out of place.

Obedience is one of the first habits of a child and if it is told to do a thing one time and made do it, then next time left go and so on his obedience will be a badly neglected part of his life.

But as Compayre has said, "Set us know, then, in the midst of the habits which we inculcate in the child, how to maintain, or rather develop, in him the reflective principles of action which permit him freely to determine his own conduct, and to adapt his actions to circumstances, and which in a word prevent him from falling into an automatic and instinctive life, and always allow him in a measure to direct himself."

The period of Childhood covers the child's time while at home and for its

first three or four years in school, the youth from this period on to the age of twenty and by this time the majority of our habits are outlined as they are to remain for life.

As a habit cannot be fully erased one should take care in forming the right one at the start. Take for an example a child in school who neglects his lessons to-day to read some story and thinks he will make up that lesson to-morrow and when to-morrow comes puts it off for another day, will never be able to overcome his desire for reading cheap material instead of his lessons. This should be thought of when it comes to the habit for thinking, every youth should be taught to do his own thinking.

One very important thing for the youth is to get into the right vocation early in life, for if he is caught in the vice of wrong habits at the start they are hard to change. The doctor, the lawyer, the clergyman, the business man, the teacher soon

acquire the peculiar habits of of their profession, and the sooner started on the right line the easier they are to learn.

The importance of the formation of a new habit in this period is so great that I will give a few points as to how to form a new habit. When you form a new habit you break an old one. One must keep the new habit constantly in mind, keep thinking this one in preference to the old one. Do not allow other ideas to absorb the attention, while you are laying the foundation of a new habit. Every time there is a chance to repeat the action to be made habitual, as in the case of reading to form a habit of mental concentration, do this every time you read not at one time and then the next fail to accomplish your object. Never allow an exception, for the beginning is a very critical time and the old habit should never creep in once.

The nature of habits in manhood

are very different from those of the earlier periods, it is in this period that they are fixed. It is in this period that habit encases one in her iron mould, so that the chances of his changing are very slight.

Statisticians tell us that, out of a thousand drunkards who try to reform, only three permanently abandon the vicious habit. The rest slide back sooner or later.

In manhood it is impossible to form new habits as in youth but nevertheless one can by persistent activities, arouse in himself, by his own environment, to establish new habits which do stand in strong contrast to the habit formerly acquired. That is the new habit has a tendency to bare closely to the old one.

As some one has said, "Habit is the enormous fly wheel of society." Man is born with a tendency to do more than he is able to do and if habit did not economize the expense of nervous and muscular energy he

would be in a sorry plight. These habits are formed in childhood and youth and great care should be taken so as to form the correct ones for the benefit of society as well as for his own personal self. From the nature of habit the correct ones are formed only from the very beginning, not old ones erased and other ones substituted instead.