

THE POWER OF HABIT.

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- I. Definition of Habit.
- II. Its Result on the Physical Body.
- III. Habit vs. Will.
- IV. Cause of the Force of Habit.
- V. Habit in Relation to Animals.
- VI. Reading Habit.
- VII. Relation to Health and Disease.
- VIII. Formation of Habits.
  - a. Hereditary Influences.
  - b. Environments.
- IX. Principles of good Habit Formation.
  - a. Prompt Resolution.
  - b. Fearlessness.
  - c. Courage.
  - d. Personal Adjustment.
- X. Conclusion.
  - a. Victory over the Formation of Habits.
  - b. Character as a Result.



41 92

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Habit is second nature; yet who of us has ever stopped to think about it? When we repeat those words we should try to discover who it was in the first place that invented or revealed it in some manner. He must have possessed philosophical and psychological powers of no limited quantity.

Habit is that which by use has become natural to us; nature is habit handed down by our ancestors, and ingrained bodily in the very structure of our brains, muscles, and nervous systems. It is well known that the children of jugglers, rope-dancers, tumblers and acrobats can be much more easily trained and taught their father's profession than any casual ordinary members of the general public. They are born, in fact, with quicker fingers, more supple limbs, nimbler toes, easier muscles than the vast mass of their fellow citizens. The constant practice of hand or foot has made a real difference at least in the very structure and fibres of their bodies; and this difference is transmitted to their children, so that the conjurer, like the poet, is to some extent born, not made. It is just the same with many arts and handicrafts.

Habit produces a positive physical difference in the individuals of the particular profession or tribe concerned, and that difference, so begotten, is handed down as a matter of original nature to the second generation. For example of this the Indians in the Andes differ immensely in the proportion of their bones, particularly their thighs, from all other individuals of the human race. This is because for generations back, they have been



mountaineers and their limbs are adapted to mountain climbing.

Our nature, in short, depends upon the structure with which we are at birth endowed; and this structure itself, in turn depends in part at least upon the acquired habits and functional practices of our parents and our remoter ancestors.

But habit itself within a single person's own life-time, also tends to acquire the fixity and rigidity of nature, becomes in time almost irresistible as it were automatic. Look, for instance at the smallest matters connected with the way we dress ourselves, cut up our food, or perform our most ordinary every day actions. If any person watches himself for a single day in this manner he will find there are thousands of similar little actions he performs almost unconsciously, by mere organic routine, each step in the process being followed, without the necessity for thinking, by the next in order, exactly as the words or rhymes of any familiar piece of poetry help to call up one another in memory, without the slightest conscious effort. As the French proverb puts it, "He who says A must say B".

A very good example of this automatic power is seen in the way we almost all wind our watches. This is done so unconsciously that we may in a few minutes afterward, think of our watches and start to wind them.

Sometimes the will itself is not strong enough to break a habit. A curious case was mentioned in London where an omnibus horse in the street obstinately refused for several minutes to move at the combined commands of his driver and a policeman. Shouts and whippings were in vain, the creature declined to budge an inch to please anybody. At last a passenger inside the cab suggested



mildly, "Shut the door, conductor". The conductor slammed the door with a bang and as he did so rang the bell. That familiar sign was too much for the horse, for he had been accustomed to start after hearing these two noises, and he immediately started, much to the surprise of the people.

We go away from home on a holiday but at the head of our letters we will still tend to begin by dating from the old familiar home address, or the beginning of a new year, we invariably use the old date.

What is the rational and underlying cause of this force of habit? Clearly, the nerves and brain elements become altered by usage, so that the direction action runs more easily along a certain channel than along any other. Very few acts of our lives are isolated, most of them move in trains or sequences so associated that one immediately summons up another, each act being, so to speak, the cue or call word for the next in order. The nervous energy flows most easily along the most accustomed channels; set up the first step in a sequence, and all the other steps follow regularly, exactly as in repeating any well known and familiar formula. Habit becomes a second nature because it modifies to some extent our originally minute bodily structure and makes nerves and muscles act together constantly in certain almost indissoluble chains of co-ordinated action. The oftener we do a thing, the easier it becomes, and when we have done certain things one after another, over and over again for many years, the tendency of the first to call up the others in due succession becomes at last all but irresistible.

There is some reason indeed to believe that nature itself



depends ultimately upon mere habit, not of course the habit of the individual who possesses it, but of his earlier ancestors. It is now fairly well proved that the character with which every one of us is endowed at birth must be regarded as direct inheritance from our parents and grand-parents, in varying degrees of compounded qualities. Hence, while habit is a second nature, it may also be said that nature in turn is a secondary habit. What we are by nature we largely or even entirely derive from the various acquired habits of our ancestors, what we make ourselves, on the other hand, by habit, we largely pass on to the natures of the future generation. And this consideration renders the awful responsibility of the formation of habits even more painfully evident than ever. It is a serious enough thought that every wrong act indulged in, every weakness gratified, every temptation yielded to, helps to stereotype the evil practice itself in the very fibers and tissues of our bodies. But it is more serious still to consider that every habit thus thoughtlessly or wickedly formed is liable to be transmitted to those that live after us.

With fuller experience and further practice in the ordinary avocations of life, the responsive activities link themselves more and more closely in association, become more and more complex, are combined in series and classes of activity of greater length and accuracy, and thus become organized into habits. Under this head fall those activities which we learn with difficulty in childhood and perform with ease in after life. At first voluntary and intentional and later involuntary and unintentional.

The work of life is for the most part done by habits of which nobody ever thinks. The bodily organization is ostensibly under the control of intellect and reason, but these brilliant qualities



would be sorely perplexed and the machinery would soon come to a standstill but for certain unobtrusive habitual activities which are already as well trained in the routine work of life as are the permanent clerks in the routine work of a Government office.

The importance of the establishment of these habitual activities is immense, as the muscular and other responses of every day life become habitual, the mind is, so to speak, set free from any special care with regard to their regulation and co-ordination and can be concentrated on the end to be attained by such activities. When once habits have been firmly established, their normal performance is accompanied by a sense of satisfaction. But if their performance is prevented or thwarted there arises a sense of want or dissatisfaction.

Animals are to a very large extent creatures of habit. Much of the pleasure of their existence lies in the performance of habitual activities. Habitual activity as well as instinct activity is based upon innate capacity. But the difference is where habitual activities always require some learning and practice and very often some intelligence on the part of the individual while instinctive activities are performed without instruction or training, either at once or with practice.

Another one of our great habits is the reading habit. There are some persons who are so fortunate as to be unable to tell when they formed the habit of reading. The people are much happier when they are permitted to form this habit unconsciously. The habit of reading is a growth, a development, not a creation.

Habit bears a great relation to health and disease. The individual is a bundle of habits, he rises, eats, talks, swears, smiles, frowns and sleeps by habit. Man sticks to his vocation



because it becomes habitual to him. Let other vocations be as easy to him and he would doubtless shift from one to the other upon slight reason.

Beauty both of body and mind is to a large degree the result of habit, likewise ugliness, with all of its characteristics. Habit gives ease, accuracy and rapidity in execution. It constitutes the major part of a mature man. He who is without habits is yet in the preparatory school of life.

With this powerful factor in the development of the human race, the question of its relation to health and disease forms one of the important problems of its welfare. The skillful physician gives no prescription until he has a knowledge of the patient's habits, not that habits are disease, but that they prepare for disease or fortify against it. Health itself, in the present development of medicine, seems to be that state of the body which keeps it from being the habitat of other forms of life; disease, that state in which the body does become a fit place for other life. Such habits then are to be commended which will render man unfit for the propagation of foreign life. To do this requires that preventive measures should be taken in the formation of habits, as the only manner in which true preventive remedies may be applied.

The formation of habits naturally divides into two great classes, those formed by heredity and those formed by environment. As to the hereditary habits not much can be done in the present state of society, as this is in the control of our ancestors. Individuals possessing habits favorable to disease become fathers and mothers of children who inherit the habits of their parents, or at least a strong tendency to repeat them.

It is with environments that the greater part of preventive



remedies must be taken. First and foremost of these is cleanliness. Cleanliness is largely a matter of habit. Regularity in work and sleep is a habit that prevents much disease.

Obtain the habits while in youth and in old age they will not forsake you. So strong do they become that they are seldom changed, be they evil or good. Many a disease baffles the skill of the physician because the habits cannot be controlled. Habit, impartial habit, willingly gives its aid to either disease or health, without a murmur it works equally well for either. It rests with man himself to use it for his best interests, to keep it from nourishing disease or from becoming itself a disease.

It is a remarkable fact that nearly all the nearsighted people in the world have become so by the unfortunate habit of looking too closely at the object. There are thousands of people who from long-continued habit, lose the capacity for long and deep inspiration, and consequently the opportunity of enriching the blood with oxygen which brings the vital current into every tissue and fiber of the human body.

A habit is formed by the recurrence again and again of the same internal or external act. Such is human nature, that no one settles down suddenly into fixed opinions, or an established way of life. Men may do wrong and they may do right, but the habit is induced by repetition. It takes time for a person to become so accustomed to a given course as to be easy and happy in such a course. What we do once we more readily and naturally do a second time, and to go on in a certain path, be it reputable or disreputable, is more easy than to start.

Bad habits are more easily formed than good ones, and are given up with more difficulty. It is easy to float down the



stream, but to resist the current and reach the fountain requires effort. Break up a man's habits, even by improving what you call his comforts and you often make him miserable.

The individual who rises early to his study or his trade soon acquires a habit of looking out upon the beauties of the morning which renders him cheerful and contented. Life to such a one has a brightness which the indolent never enjoy. Even duties that are at first trying and difficult, become such sources of real pleasure that we often hear the laborer singing merrily at his work. Only be sure that the course is right and just, and as soon as it becomes habitual it will produce positive enjoyment. Good habits are every thing to a young man. The mind as well as the body suffers from bad habits.

The most important experience, which, sooner or later, meets every thoughtful person, both in his own intellectual development and in his observation of others, is that every act and every definite thought leaves behind it an inclination which is like a material influence, and which makes the next similar thought or act easier and the next dissimilar thought or act more difficult.

The real problem of life is simply and solely one of habit and the end of all education should be to train people to inclination towards good. One should try rather to cultivate good habits than merely to negatively to escape from the bad ones. It is much easier in the inner life, as in the outer, to attack positively than to repel defensively. The main point to be gained is the habit of prompt resolution, directed immediately toward action.

The second principle of good habits is fearlessness. Fear does not prevent the approach of that which is feared, it only exhausts beforehand the strength which one needs to meet the thing



he fears. Most of the things which we fear to meet are not in reality so terrible as they appear to be when looked at from afar. Beyond this philosophical defense from fear, however, lie certain spiritual conditions of courage. The chief of these is determining for one's self what are the best blessings of life. First of all one must acquire as soon as possible the habit of preferring the better things to the worse. He must especially abandon the expectation of possessing at the same time different things which are contradictory of each other. Here is the secret of failure in many a career.

Any individual must, at any cost, and even for the sake of one's own soul, make it his habit to cultivate love for others, not first of all inquiring whether they deserve that love or not. Further our dislikes must be directed, not against people, but against things. The real difficulty in the cultivation of good habits is in ridding the heart of its natural selfishness.

Personal habit need not confine itself to the manner and care of the person, but it may include habits of thought, speech and action. There is practically no limit to the amount of good a country teacher may do, and the attention given by the teacher to her pupils' habits and requirements should be limited only by her utmost ability.

One writer says that the formation of habit is in the change of an outer or inner action into a propensity. The organic powers grow through practice. Their action in this way becomes easier, skill is formed and habit also, in so far as an inclination to repeat the action frequently is connected therewith. Rosenkranz defines habit as "The identity of consciousness with the particularity of an action or suffering".



Imagine what life would be like if we had always to think about things the way we do at the start, if for instance when eating we had to think about our knives and forks the way four year olds do. Forming habits is like acquiring capital. A person who always has to think out each simple act would be like a man who lives from hand to mouth, who can never advance his position in life, because he has always to think about that day's bread. The man who forms habits, is on the contrary, storing up a great deal of useful ability, he doesn't have to work all the time for his present day's needs, for he can draw on his capital, these habits, to supply many of his wants and so be free to make wide plans and to foresee the future. Harmful habits might be likened to debts.

Ordinarily after people are twenty-five they do not change their general habits of thought and conduct. Could the young but realize how soon they become bundles of habit, they would give more heed to their conduct while in the plastic state. We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or vice leaves its never so little scar.

One writer says, "A man's character is really just the sum total of his habits of thought and action", but others believe his emotional temperament and his ideals must enter into this.

In the training an individual receives for a practical education one of the most important requirements is the formation of right habits and the development of a virtuous and noble character. Habits become fixed and exercise complete dominion over us.

To form a bad habit is of all things most dangerous when we find ourselves already prone to the habit by very nature. However we may reflect with pleasure that every temptation resisted, every weakness thwarted, every exercise of self control ensured, helps to



build up a habit of resistance and makes victory over the evil more easy in the future.

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