

SOME THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION

HABIT is one of those things that everyone knows about, but few can correctly define. The common notion of it as the getting used to a thing, finding it easier to do, acquiring a taste for it, or permitting it to get a hold on one, is all very well as far as it goes, but it does not bring us very far after all. Can we hope to make things any better by invoking the aid of psychology and philosophy? Well, of course it is possible in this way to throw some light on the subject, and especially to render it more interesting by linking it up with the more attractive problems of these sciences; but when all is said and done, our ignorance of important aspects of the question will, from the very nature of the case, still largely outweigh our knowledge.

St. Thomas, following Aristotle, has defined habit as "A quality, not easily admitting of change, which modifies its subject, either in the sense of improving or impairing it, in its inner constitution or in the exercise of its activities." Like all the definitions of Aristotle, this one, for all that it has a rather commonplace air, possesses a really vast depth of meaning.

A habit must not, however, be regarded merely as the sum total of a series of impressions, but rather as the unique and indivisible resultant of them all. It bears an analogy, not so much to a cinema film, with its graduated series of distinct though almost similar photographs, which, when flashed rapidly across the screen, produce the illusion of a continuous motion, as to a composite photograph, the distilled essence of several exposures combined.

The "how" of education has claimed immense concentration of effort. The "why," the end, the aim and purpose of it all, precisely what the pupil is to be taught, and wherefore, has received less lucid consideration. In the old days of unreformed universities and Church-endowed education, the uniform control involved a common aim; the great outstanding purpose to be realized was the religious purpose. To-day there is no such unifying teleological idea. The old

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education was deficient in method, with antiquated and entirely inadequate machinery. But it aimed at the traditional end, even if the fires of true religion had burned dim. To-day the fatal indecision which condemns much education to futility is that there is no clearly conceived end, derived from life as it is lived outside the educational world, to guide the efforts of our improved machinery. Bolshevism provides such an end, but we have none, not even a false one.

Will the psycho-analysts ever succeed in discovering, not merely the hidden sources of mental disease, but, what is far more important, the procedure governing the development, from the formless mind and will of the child, of the highly organized system of habits which characterizes adult life? It is gravely to be feared that their materialistic bias disqualifies them in this regard. One might as easily indeed expect a stone-deaf person to appreciate the beauty of a sonata of Beethoven, as hope for real insight into the workings of the soul from people who see nothing more in moral culture than the resultant of the clash between animal instinct, reaching out blindly towards its own ends, and the sanctions and conventions imposed by society to keep it within due bounds.

Psychology may have a questionable title-deed to a home-stead in the community of the sciences, but it is not superstition. It may be quite too much opinion and quite too little fact; it may be an academic muddle or a cultist contention; it may still be, despite all its drastic purging and iconoclastic redemption, tradition-ridden and engaged in ploughing seas with an untested compass; but its quest has no touch of superstitious misguidance, not even of quixotic tilting. It may be floundering in its premises and throbbing in its conclusions; it is unquestionably far more subject than its brethren of the naturalistic sciences to the predilections of faith and temperament and the intolerant championships of accepted positions, at times verging upon cults; but when the damning charges have been spent with machine-gun deadliness, the project of a valid discipline remains undefeated.

One of the most familiar and one of the most puzzling of

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the facts of experience is that our minds and bodies are interconnected. The apparently simple act of raising an arm because we wish to do so bristles with theoretical difficulties of all kinds. It certainly seems to us that our minds can, within certain limits, influence our bodies, but the philosophical explanation of this fact is so difficult that some philosophers find it easier to deny the fact. The other fact, that our bodies can influence our minds, is, for some people, easier to understand. But there are philosophers who deny both facts. According to them the mental and physical worlds may run, as it were, parallel to one another, but there is no casual connection between them. In this matter, however, the common-sense view is probably much nearer the truth than are the subtleties of the philosophers.

When we try to remember a name, and we have it on the tip of our tongue, but just fail to recall it, then, growing vexed, we make the autosuggestion of lost memory. If, in addition, we are so ill-advised as to make vigorous efforts towards recollection, such vague traces of memory as may remain are expunged, and the mind becomes a blank.

The law that is at work in these cases may be formulated in the following terms: *When an idea imposes itself on the mind to such an extent as to give rise to a suggestion, all the conscious efforts which the subject makes in order to counteract this suggestion are not merely without the desired effect, but they actually run counter to the subject's conscious wishes and tend to intensify the suggestion.*

The illusion is that images derived from sensations are somehow stored up in the mind, and that what we revive in memory is a sort of faded relic of the original impression. It is true that we feel as if we were recapturing the impression; but it is only a feeling: what we are really doing is to re-enact the original act of perception, which is a different thing altogether.

What we revive are our subjective states, and these, having formed an integral part of our original perceptions, lead us to believe that we are having the same objective appearance over again.

This seems to us to be on exactly the right lines, and truth

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or falsity is really quite independent of the question whether a particular part of the cortex is appropriated to a particular mental process or not. Some revolt against the tyranny of the physiologist: habit is more than instinct; ideals are more than endocrine glands; even the "conditioned reflex" presupposes attention; what we perceive is not objects but relations; we have an intuition of the existence of other minds and do not infer it laboriously from uncertain data; in short, while it may be possible to understand the mind without the body, it is certainly impossible to understand the body without the mind.

What are the "men of genius," these unaccountable beings who appear among us from time to time like visitors from another world? Are they "freaks," in the sense that they owe their peculiarities to some chance disturbance of the normal type, and have no real significance from the evolutionary point of view; or are they true variations, new and superior forms of life which may in the distant future become stabilized and perpetuated? That there is some affinity between genius and insanity has always been recognized, but whether it is merely a resemblance or an essential connexion remains obscure. The facts are too often selected to fit the theory: there is a tendency, according to one's natural bias, either to deny true "genius" to anyone whose mind is clearly unsound, or to suspect every one who is not demonstrably insane as being merely "talented"—which in this controversy becomes almost a term of derision. Nevertheless, when every border-line case is ruled out there remain so many instances of that "demonic" power which Professor Kretschmer justly claims as the hall-mark of genius showing itself in men who were either themselves unmistakably psychopathic or sprang from an evidently abnormal stock that one can hardly deny the possibility of some fairly close connexion.

But before we conclude that genius is an essentially morbid phenomenon we must make sure that there is no other explanation that fits the particular case. In the first place we are most of us, fortunately or unfortunately, a little "abnormal," and it is only natural that the same tendencies

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should be found "writ large" in the man of genius. Again, it may well be that his excessive activities (operating, it must be remembered, in what can never be a wholly congenial environment) are liable to "o'er-inform his tenement of clay" and disturb the equilibrium of the organism. Thirdly, certain manifestations of what one may reasonably call genius are no doubt the indirect consequences of some organic defect which has either diverted the main energies of the individual into one restricted channel, or produced a violent counter-reaction. Adler has familiarized us with the principle of "over-compensation"; and though one may think it a little far fetched to ascribe the Seventh Symphony to Beethoven's deafness, as he does, the reality of the phenomenon in general can hardly be gainsaid. And lastly, to have done with objections and qualifications, some mental diseases are like physical diseases, which may attack anybody from causes which elude analysis; there may have been what, to disguise our ignorance, we call a predisposition, but we have no means of knowing in how many cases it may be latent.

Accordingly genius, being the laurel thrown to talent, is largely an accident, whereby the private life receives public status. One may surely demur. Genius, no doubt, is a word too often and too lightly used; but to the English it does mean something larger than talent acclaimed. It suggests a quickness far beyond competence, a vision far beyond normal, and an equally unusual power of forging through irrelevant detail to the essential point within. Genius leaps where talents march with consequent liability to slips and collapses. Hence the eternal proximity of genius and insanity, which, taking a wide view of insanity, this author holds to be inseparable. But what does the argument, here heavily padded with the jargon of medical psychology, amount to? Simply that people who see one thing at a time may apprehend it with such intensity that they are blinded to much else. We are back at our Greek conjunction of the specialist with the idiot.

That physique and character are very closely connected is undeniable; and it is remarkable how immediately and

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instinctively we form an impression of character from the merest glimpse of another person's features or movements. It must be admitted, however, that these inferences can be very wide of the mark. Single instances, says Professor Pear, prove nothing. But I regret that for several years, misled by a voice which sounded like a carriage rolling up a loose gravel drive, I avoided making a closer acquaintance with one of the friendliest men in my vicinity.

Education is a scaffolding which is pulled down when the building is complete, and no *general* scheme of education can possibly furnish the learner with just the body of *special* knowledge which he requires in that one pigeon-hole out of millions that he is going to occupy when it comes to his life-job.

A hundred years ago or more William Hazlitt put this point about the "useful" subject as well as it can ever be put in his brief essay on *A Classical Education*.

It is amusing, when one reads the effusions of men like Shaw and Bertrand Russell, who successfully convince the world that they are launching some entirely new theory, to be able to find the passage in some writer like Hazlitt, who is worth a million of them, where their arguments have been stated and answered long before they themselves were born.

Hazlitt says, "By an obvious transposition of ideas some persons have confounded a knowledge of useful things with useful knowledge. Knowledge is only useful in itself as it exercises or gives pleasure to the mind, the only knowledge that is of use in a practical sense is professional knowledge."

We do not, I think, sufficiently reflect how rare, in comparison with genius, is consummate learning. That learning should be less admired than genius is natural enough. Men admire what is grand most of all when it seems to be done easily, and the mark of genius is its divine facility—it may endure agonies but it does *not* take pains. Learning, on the other hand, must both take pains and give them. Mediocrity, or less, can appreciate genius. But learning can be known only by its like.

The capacity to profit by experience in such a way as to accommodate to conditions, which has been called educa-

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bility in psychology and biology, is one of the primary duties of Catholics, who hold that intellectual education must not be separated from religion and moral instruction. The Church affirms that knowledge of the Christian faith, and not profane subjects, is the first essential of the right ordering of human life. The *ecclesia docens* claims all education for its field: all activities fall within the purview of the Church; and therefore the sanctification of the individual soul is the primary essential which will in the end outweigh all secular knowledge and make for everlasting knowledge and happiness. In order to achieve this end the intellect requires to be determined to its true end. Not all men are moved to think in assent by the same influences, nor do all intellects reach the same thought. Therefore, the intellect is capable of receiving habits. It follows that the origin, the duration, the various phases of existence and action of each particular creature were for eternity willed by God, either permissively or positively, with a view to a certain end.

Science is not composed of unrelated parts; rather it is an organic whole—its parts complementing on another. True education is the sum of all these cases and activities by which the life and growth of the child's body are safeguarded and promoted, and the due development of all his faculties, physical, mental and moral, is secured. It logically follows that it must aim "at securing the supreme good, that is God, for the souls of those who are being educated and the maximum of temporal well-being for human society."

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