Psychic Basis of Character.*

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It is well, when so much is being said and done along the lines of new thought, mental phenomena, psychotherapy, etc., to pause for a moment, inspect our groundwork, and be sure that our knowledge of fundamental and well-authenticated facts is adequate and sound.

As physicians and nurses, we are not merely healers and ministers to physical ills, but we are, or should be, teachers and interpreters of human character.

By character we mean the mode of conduct of an individual as expressed in his successive voluntary acts.

The view usually taken is that character is a substratum, underlying and directing our mode of action. This latter view confuses character with the will, which is the true governor of our psychic life and the moulder of character. Thus character is a gradual growth, the result of conscious effort under the direction of the will. This growth of character is gradually brought about through the formation of habits under the guidance of the will.

By habit we mean the manner in which all of the acts of our daily life are performed. This seems simple enough as a general statement, but when we come to examine it more closely and analyse the process of habit formation, it leads us into the most intricate problems of psychology.

At the very outset of conscious life we begin to form habits. At first, each conscious act is performed with the greatest difficulty, and requires the concentrated and strenuous effort of the child for its performance.

These acts at first have to do with the simplest needs of human life. Little by little, through constant repetition, acts that at first were accomplished in a laborious and crude way are performed almost involuntarily and unconsciously.

This process of habit formation is going on from earliest childhood until adult life. Thus we take on habits of speech, dress, demeanour, and carriage, that become a part of our very personality, and by the age of twenty-five these habits that concern our daily, personal needs have become so fixed that to change them becomes a herculean and all but impossible task.

Thus we explain in a general way the well-known facts of every-day life. What lies back of all these external facts and what relation do they bear to character?

Each habit is represented by definite relationships in the cells of the brain. The brain is composed of innumerable groups of cells connected with one another by minute fibres.

These cells possess different specific functions; some are capable of receiving impressions from the outside world and storing them; others have the power to send out impulses either through their own initiative or when stimulated by other groups of cells or from the outside world.

These groups of cells found in the cortex or gray substance of the brain are known as cerebral centres, and our lives are spent, for the most part, in educating these brain centres.

Definite areas in the cortex correspond to the five principal senses; thus we have a speech centre, a centre for hearing, one for sight, smell, touch. These are connected with the outside world by means of nerve fibres, either afferent or efferent, and they communicate with one another through what are known as association fibres. During our waking hours these centres are receiving stimuli from a thousand sources through the organs of sense, along the fibres which connect them with the brain. At first these stimuli produce faint impressions, and are confusing, but constant repetition soon establishes a path along which stimuli travel to the various centres of the brain.

The ease or speed with which these impulses travel, and the permanency of their impression upon the brain centres determine the fixedness of our habits. By the age of puberty, most of these habits that have to do with the ordinary bodily functions have become well established and are largely relegated to lower centres, *i.e.*, they become automatic or involuntary. Thus the higher centres, freed from the demands of ordinary daily life, are left to the exercise and development of higher centres, which have to do with the intellectual, the emotional, the spiritual.

The period devoted chiefly to the formation of bodily habits is not entirely devoid of influence upon the higher intellectual centres, for the physiological and psychological aspects of the brain are so interdependent that neither can be intelligently studied apart from the other. As the cultivation of bodily habits leads to definite and characteristic manners in gait, posture, facial expression and speech, so the development of thought habits stamps the individual's character with an unmistakable seal.

Before we leave the subject of bodily habit, I must emphasise the important bearing of habit upon character.

Within certain narrow limitations, our bodily habits have but little bearing upon what we designate as character, but so soon as these

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