

Ambidexterity and its Relations to School Hygiene.*

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Ambidexterity is an artificial and acquired art, and its introduction is not infrequently attended with difficulties and even active opposition.

It means in school work not only the training of both hands, but the training of all corresponding nerve-centres and dependencies, the development of the two hemispheres of the brain to a perfect whole, each with its corresponding attributes harmoniously developed and properly balanced. It means to its disciples the avoidance of various forms of spinal complaints by a proper posture and upright, vertical writing, the avoidance of various defects of the eyesight by the avoidance of strain (inevitable to the child writing a slanting hand). It means the avoidance of fatigue by an organised change of posture, and by working alternately right and left hand muscles and nerves, and with them the brain centres that direct them.

The opposition says that such training is artificial, and the opposition is right: It is.

But if ambidexterity is artificial, so is our 20th century life, so is our modern civilisation, our literature, our joys for the most part, and our sorrows, too. We ourselves and our world grow on an artificial basis, and our much-worked brains form many thought-centres that natural man does not need. *Natural* man (and Heaven defend us from him, for I have seen him in his natural state in the wilds of Patagonia!)—*natural* man, I repeat (and still more, *natural* woman) is the most repulsive, unclean, animal creation knows.

We want, as Mr. Jackson, the great champion of ambidexterity, says, "we want every inch of our brains." So save us from the standard of natural man with his unformed, rudimentary perceptions, his selfishness, his cruelty, his low pleasures, and mean sorrows.

Natural man, to those who have known him, is no heroic memory.

Ambidexterity is no new science. In past ages, in prehistoric times, there have been extraordinary nations and exceptional individuals who were bi-manual.

It is curious to note that the nations known to have been bi-manual always had moral, inventive, artistic qualities that raised them above the mass of their fellows.

* To those interested in an extension of the subject I recommend Mr. John Jackson's book "Ambidexterity," published by Kegan Paul.—L. M.

Thus early drawings of those idealists of a lost and primitive race—the cavern dwellers of Europe—show in their details signs of left and right-handedness. The Scythians, a people strong, moral, and clean above their age—were ambidextrous. The Japanese, the most humane, healthy-minded of Orientals, have been ambidextrous for many centuries. The bravest, most able Jews of Old Testament fame, mighty men and "helpers of war," viz., the 700 slingers of the tribe of Benjamin, and a select and highly-praised section of King David's army, were ambidextrous. Yes. The Rev. H. J. Dunkinfield Astley, Litt.D., F.R.Hist.S., gives an account of a far-away "Eolithic race," prior to the Palæolithic or Neolithic man, who undoubtedly made right and left-hand flint instruments, and showed, no doubt, pioneers of progress and heralds of a dawn of thought and invention that must have placed them several degrees above the human brutes of their own dark ages.

But the great mass of humanity has been, is, and probably will be, right-handed.

For this—as the opponents of ambidexterity point out—there are anatomical reasons, well-recognised by all students of the subject, be they in pro or in contra, and these objections are based on facts relating to the circulatory and respiratory organs, and even to the relative weight of the left and right side of the body, rendering it at least inconvenient to the beginner to use his left hand as frequently as his right.

This fact is, as I said, recognised, and will guide the teacher of ambidexterity to proceed gradually and carefully, rather to suggest than command, to note signs of fatigue, to train cautiously and avoid all and any violent measure.

Wherever ambidexterity has been educationally utilised the results have been favourable. In Europe and America numerous schools and studios that have adopted this form of teaching testify to this fact.

From practical experience I have seen the most happy results springing from judicious ambidextral training.

Children taught to use the left and right hand alternately in writing and drawing, and even, on occasion, to use both hands simultaneously, are less liable to brain fag and, curiously enough, seem to have their moral instincts more alert than children not so trained. They seem to profit psychically even more than physically.

Among hundreds of children I have constantly observed, only a very few are naturally and by instinct ambidextral. These children are invariably well-balanced and intelligent.

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