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Habit in the Religious Life*

In the Development of the Individual

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It is well that the first emphasis is laid upon the individual. For in the individual we must find the basis of all else. The mass consciousness is determined by the individual consciousness, the mass character by the individual character, the mass conduct by the conduct of the individual. The progress of our civilization is just as fast or as slow as the progress of the average individual towards that which is highest and best, in culture, in knowledge, and in character. We do well, therefore, to direct our attention at the outset to the individual.

What we wish to see accomplished, in the life of the individual in regard to habits, sentiments, and ideas, is of course, first of all, and in a general way, such a development of the individual will, intellect, and feeling, that at every stage of his life-progress, he shall, up to the measure of his capacity at that stage, make that spiritual interpretation of his experience, and exercise that control over his conduct, in which religion and morality consist. Precocity in religion and morals is no more to be desired than its opposite extreme. "First the blade, then the ear," and in due time "the full corn in the ear." Nothing is more desirable than that the child shall speak as a child, understand as a child, and think as a child. When he becomes a man, he may put away childish things.

It seems to me that in the matter of *habit* in the religious and moral life, there is especial need that we observe an old and familiar maxim of Aristotle's, the wisdom of which impresses me more and more, viz., to avoid extremes, and steer carefully along the golden mean between excess and defect. As applied to the subject of habit, we may easily see how the principle works out. On the one hand, it is beyond all question desirable that the individual should acquire a large number of good habits, and that these habits should become so thoroughly a part of himself, that the actions which have thus become habitual, may be regularly performed by the individual with a minimum of attention to their details. The value of this, of course, lies in the fact

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that in this way the voluntary attention is left free for larger and more vital matters; and so progress is made possible, which would be quite impossible if the mind were compelled continually to occupy itself with every petty detail of the hourly conduct. Many of our daily movements are performed more promptly and accurately without direct attention than they would be with it. You can run down a familiar stairway in the dark much better if you do not pay attention to the details of your movements.

On the other hand it is equally certain that man should be something more than a mere bundle of habits. Any organism that becomes so fixed and settled in a certain system of reactions to its environment that it is unable to react in new ways in response to new conditions, will be likely to fare badly when those new conditions present themselves. Any species that lacks the capacity of adjustment to unforeseen conditions will inevitably be worsted in the struggle for existence. As a matter of fact, that which we call *progress* depends on the power of adjustment to unforeseen conditions, together with the power to conceive ideal conditions, and to be moved to the effort to make those ideal conditions real. I suppose one may safely say, that in the strict sense it is only in the human race that any such thing as progress has ever taken place, as a process initiated from within; and the reason is that to man alone belongs the power of conceiving ideal conditions, contrasting them with actual conditions, and endeavoring to get the ideal conditions actualized. So that human progress and well-being consist as much in the conquest over environment as in adjustment to environment.

The two extremes, then, are these,—on the one hand, that excessive habituation which would make progress impossible, and turn the individual into a mere religious and moral machine; and on the other, that failure to implant habits in childhood, which makes it necessary throughout life for the individual to be constantly on the watch regarding every step he shall take, every word he shall speak, and every paltry action he shall perform.

I can easily conceive of an objection that may be raised against the doctrine that the moral and religious life should to any extent be handed over to habit, or become habitual. "Does not this destroy the very morality and the very religiousness of the it?" the objector will say. For does not the morality of an act consist essentially in the inner motive, the idea, the conscious purpose with which it is performed? Is it not this definite, conscious purpose of which the outer act is but the expression and result that makes the act a moral or a religious one; and could there be a moral or a religious act, where that conscious purpose was lacking? How then can an habitual act be a moral or religious act at all? Is not the morality of an act really in inverse

relation to the habituation that is to be found in it, so that if an act were completely habitual, it would be entirely non-moral, or non-religious?

This objection may be disposed of, I believe, by two considerations:—

(1) Definite, conscious purpose may be conceived either as exercising immediate and continuous control over every specific act of the daily life, or as exercising an indirect and general control over these, through, and by means of, the larger and more far-reaching life-purposes and ideals, in whose realization every one of these special actions plays its own part. Beyond a doubt the highest type of character is not the man who is obliged to keep a watch continually over the details of his conduct, so as to make sure that every little act is done with a right motive; but rather the man whose conscious attention and reflection are occupied with the larger ideals and moral purposes of human life, and who has so trained himself to act in accord with these great purposes and ideals, that the concrete details of his conduct shall easily and naturally conform themselves to these standards without the necessity of any special attention and self-scrutiny at the moment. As the late Dr. Geo. Matheson says, one of the greatest charms of the Christ character consisted in its spontaneity and naturalness. It was unstudied. When Jesus met the leper in the way, and heard his pitiful cry: "If thou wilt, thou canst, make me clean," there was no hesitation, no deliberation, no exact weighing of motives. He did not stop to ask himself how the Messiah ought to act under such circumstances. All that sort of thing was unnecessary, because he had once for all committed himself to a great life-purpose, and in relation to that life-purpose every specific act fell easily and naturally and promptly into its place. "And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand and touched him and said unto him, I will; be thou clean." Spontaneous? shall I say habitual? Yes, but in the high and exalted sense that a transcendent and life-controlling ideal had fixed the habit.

(2) In the second place it must be observed that in the development of the child, the natural order is external conformity first, and inner comprehension afterwards. And here again I learn much from Aristotle. "Moral virtue," he says, "is developed in the individual by training." The child is first trained to do virtuous acts, and by and by he finds himself acting virtuously. That is to say, his will is trained to conform to certain rules of action, and through repeated acts, in which he conforms to this external standard, he comes by degrees to an understanding of the inner meaning of the act, on the side of motive and purpose. Just as we must become musicians by play-

ing, so we become virtuous by behaving virtuously. This is the paradox of morals, and, like some other paradoxes, it is a profound truth. Sir Leslie Stephen has expressed it in his own way by saying that the moral law, both in the race and in the individual, has first to be couched in the form "*Do this*," in order that by degrees it may take on the form "*Be this*." And the highest type of character, as regards truthfulness, for example, is not the man who, with punctilious care, tells the exact and literal truth in every specific instance, but the man who can at all times, and under all circumstances, be relied upon to be true. "*Be true*" is a higher law than "*tell the truth*."

What I have said of morality is true also of religion. The child's religion is necessarily made up to a large extent of sensuous images and ideas, and their appropriate reactions; just as the religion of a childish race is anthropomorphic, idolatrous and ceremonious. Progress, in the race, takes place by the gradual transfiguration of the ritual with its vital and inner significance, and at the same time by the gradual purification and simplification of that ritual in accordance with the deepening spiritual insight.

In the case of a child born in a comparatively pure spiritual atmosphere, I should think the question: "How much conformity to religious custom should we require?" might be answered in some such way as this:—First of all see to it that no superfluous, meaningless, or valueless, religious custom is permitted to remain. Simplify, where necessary, our religious practice, by the elimination of everything not really significant or fruitful in religious life. If any of the wine-skins have really become old and worthless, let them be discarded.

Then secondly, train the child from infancy to the observance of such religious customs as are really appropriate to his age and circumstances, being careful always to lead him by example rather than by command.

And thirdly, instruct the child, as rapidly as the normal growth of his intelligence permits, in the principles and ideas underlying these observances, so that he may, at every stage of his growth, act not only habitually, but also intelligently; his action, so far as the special concrete case is concerned, being habitual, yet controlled by the largest spiritual idea of which he is capable at that age.