

THE FUNCTION OF ATTENTION IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

TRUE study of any branch of knowledge consists in giving the matter of that branch such repetitions of attentive consideration that it at length becomes an integral part of the domain of the consciousness, and can at any time, under any correlated stimulus, be made use of by automatic mental action.

True Study of an Art consists, primarily in the attentive repetitions of the action of the physiological organs, involved in the productions of that Art, until that action becomes automatic, and is as well and so naturally performed as any original reflex physiological function.

In these definitions the word qualifying the necessary processes is the adjective attentive, denoting the presence of attention in the operation. Without this word the definitions would not merely be imperfect, they would be essentially incorrect and misleading.

Only in the quality of being attentive can the reiterated consideration and the reiterated action, respectively, result in the possession, on the one hand, of a new realm of knowledge, or, on the other hand, of a new area of power.

What is the nature and manner of expression of this supreme quality Attention?

An appreciative intellectual grasp of the answer to this question and a realisation of the function of its subject in the processes of human personal evolution, should be recognised as fundamental elements in the knowledge and understanding of the true educationist, be he teacher or not.

The word Attention is used largely, but loosely, in educational employments, yet we have no other word with which, habitually, to express that attitude of the consciousness which, in any study or acquisition of power, is absolutely and continuously demanded, in

order to ensure intrinsic results. The term concentration is more literally correct in this relation, but concentration has, with most persons, too limited and too special an application to render it available for ordinary use instead of Attention.

Yet the Attention we are discussing, the attention of all knowledge-acquiring processes, may perhaps be better understood and realized if it is regarded as Concentrated Attention.

Attention is that condition or attitude of consciousness in which its rays are steadily and unintermittently centred upon the thing being done or the subject of study. This may be presented to the consciousness by one or more of the special senses, or it may already be a content of the mind; the special element in the attitude being the intentness with which the consciousness operates. This intentness of gaze must proceed to such a degree that all other sensible or mental objects, except the one, become excluded from its range.

In the effort to do this to maintain concentrated attention, the Will of the individual is brought into play, and its function in the process may be compared to that played by a burning-glass held between the sun and the surface of an object. If it is intended that the sun's rays shall produce, through the burning-glass, a definite and observable effect, the glass must be held in such a relation to the object that the rays of light converge upon one spot. This spot, or focus, then receives the whole force of the rays that pass through the glass; it alone, of all that surrounding surface, is brought out into relief and operated upon. In like manner the Will, in sustaining attention, focuses the rays of the consciousness, with all their inherent dynamic forces, upon one circumscribed area, physiological, mental, or moral, as the case may be, wherein lies the work to be done.

Thus, we see that Attention is intentness of Mental Vision, concentrated and maintained by action of the Will. It is not a separate function or property of the mind, like perception, imagination, reason, &c., as some psychologists might lead us to suppose, but a mode of action, — the true mode of the Will's action. In other words, it is the definite, efficient expression of the Volition or Will force of the individual.

The functions perception, conception, imagination, &c., are instruments of the Ego for operating upon the phenomenal world

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and upon mental appropriations of that world; when one or more of these thus operates with all its force, undiverted from its employment by any surrounding object, then Attention is exhibited.

Will is the manifestation or action of the real human Ego; Attention designates the mode in which that manifestation is functionally exhibited, and by which alone permanent results are produced.

In relation to the psychological realm in which Attention is a feature, we may formulate the following scheme. This scheme may serve to make the general bearings of the subject clearer and to more definitely indicate the part played by Attention in all psychological phenomena.

The source of mental movement arises in Emotion=the desire to know.

The direction of the movement lies with Reason=how and what to know.

The machinery of the movement is provided by the mental=the means by which activities the knowledge is (Perception, etc.) gained.

The maintaining force of the movement resides in the Will=the mode by (the Energy which continuity of of the Ego.) operation is ensured.

The efficient relation of the two last groups of factors to each other, and their joint relation to the object under study, are expressed by our term Attention. The Will holds the mental activities employed rigidly and persistently to their work.

The Ego, through Volition, can only establish relations with objects external to itself through the mental activities, Perception, Conception, Judgment, Imagination, &c., and to effect this, the latter must be maintained in operation in a direct line between the Ego, represented by Volition, and the object to be studied; just as the gun of the sportsman must be held with exact precision longitudinally between his eye and the object he desires to hit. If the gun be allowed to deviate in the least degree from the exact line of vision, the sportsman misses his object, so, also, if Perception, or Conception, or

Judgment, or Imagination, whichever of these activities or faculties is in use, is permitted to lose its direct bearing upon

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the work in hand absolute failure of purpose ensues. In this illustration the steady maintenance of the gun in precise position is a parallel to the psychological action of Attention.

When we grasp the full bearing of the truths here pointed out, we cannot fail to perceive the significant relation which the mental attitude of Attention holds to all educational processes and employments, nor can we assign it too prominent a position in laying down true and efficient methods of culture. Let Volition, the Mental Activities, the Light of Reason, the Physiological System of nerves and muscles, and vast mines of possible knowledge, all be provided; what intrinsic and permanent result can be accomplished amongst them if the manner in which they are used does not include Attention?

Modern Education fails, as evident to all thoughtful observers of human life, very largely because of its neglect to maintain this essential factor of personal evolution in its due place. The desultoriness, aimlessness and mental commonplaceness of the general adult life around us, spring from this omission.

Modern Education, in its multitude of subjects, in its haste in passing from one subject to another, and in its lack of precise aim, exhibits desultoriness in employment of time and faculty.

Desultoriness is the antithesis of Systematic Attention.

Modern Education rules over an area from which nothing new arises as the fruit of its fostering care, it brings no new thing into being from out its world of chaos.

This results from its desultoriness of method and action.

The Human Will is, however, a natural creator when it operates through Concentrated Attention, but education fails in its true mission as a stimulus and guide to individual creative force, because of this unreasonable neglect of a fundamental principle.

Every area of acquired skill is a new creation; it has a real, patent existence and is an object of possession and use in the world of human life, which did not exist previous to its evolution by the personal Will operating through the mental activities upon a physiological chaos.

To prevent possible confusion of thought in tracing out the subject, it may be remarked here that there is a mental attitude to which the term, Attention is commonly applied. This may be termed Passive Attention.

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Passive Attention rules the consciousness when one listens to an eloquent speech or interesting lecture.

In such instances the Will is in abeyance, the consciousness being probably held entranced by forces which the Occultist might term Mantramic.

Passive attention also rules when the mind follows an absorbing train of thought. But this form is not that demanded for personal growth; educationally it is of slight value and without necessary relation to our subject.

Attention plays its necessary part in each one of the realms or planes of life to which the human individual belongs: —

1. On the physical plane; —in the physiological realm of the special senses and the nervous and muscular systems. Conscious action under its rule in this realm results in skill, the basis not only of all art and artistic performance, but of every nicely adapted movement of the human limbs and frame for practical purpose or for the display of agility and gracefulness.

2. On the mental plane; —in the psychological realm of concepts, comparisons, judgments, deductions, speculations and ideals. On this plane intellectual energy under the control of Attention, creates logical systematic and consecutive forms of thought, true panoramic fields of vision out of detached intellectual details, and new emotional forms of power and beauty.

3. On the moral plane; —in the spiritual realm of supreme truths, vital principles, gropings after the Infinite, the laws of human relationships, and the application of all these to the entire conduct of the personal life. In this

supreme area the moral sentiments and spiritual aspirations after perfection of life, concentrate their attention upon definite details of personal thought and behaviour, the production of grace of spirit, reliability of disposition, agreement of conduct with principle, altruism in all its effective forms, and the development of a personal influence ever tending towards the evolution of a vitalizing social harmony.

In the evolution of personal life, when the object of its action is an area or detail of any one of these realms, Attention may be termed specific, and when the control of the adopted purpose of existence as a whole is maintained through its means, establishing an efficient and well-ordered unity amongst the many divisions and

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details of that purpose, then we may designate Attention as supreme.

“Genius” has been defined as “an infinite capacity for taking pains.” The expression “taking pains” is merely a synonym for “close attention to minute details.” “Close attention to details” takes each brick of which the “mansion for all lovely forms,” —the structure of personal knowledge, capacity and ability, is to be built, and carefully places it in its due position, cementing it there at once. The structure so put together is substantial, capacious, beautiful, and efficient.

This structure, the result of infinite pains long continued, is that which the world wonders at and worships and calls Genius. Nearly all men, if first guided and supported along the toilsome track and afterwards urged along it by pressure of their own Wills, might develop some form of power and skill which would elevate them considerably towards that height from which Genius looks down, and thus render the ordinary world much less commonplace, monotonous and unskillful than it is at present. To sum up: —Concentrated Attention is the expression of the Will, and Will is the central, animating force proceeding from the Ego. Will, operating under the condition of Attention upon the chaos of its attendant world, and co-ordinating the energies, forces and movements of that world, converts it into a realm of form, power, and purpose, centering around the Ego.

This constitutes Personal Evolution resulting at length in a perfected Individuality, the creation of its own Will.