

SOCIAL CONTROL. IV.

SUGGESTION.

WE have seen how, by means of sanctions, legal, social, and supernatural, the stubborn will is bent to right action. We have now to consider how society without the use of any sanction can attain the same result. This calls for a study of suggestion.

Sentiments and ideas can be suggested as well as volitions. Why, then, it may be asked, is suggestion treated in connection with the will rather than with the feelings and judgment? The answer is that when society by means of reiterated suggestion, beginning with the plastic child mind and continuing through the whole period of character-making, graves deeply into the soul of the individual certain admirations or certain estimates, it is these latter that are the immediate stimuli to conduct, and hence subject matter of this series of studies. The rôle of suggestion in moral upbuilding will be described when we come to explain the sway of the feelings by social ideals and of the judgments by social valuations. Under "Suggestion," as an independent topic, we are called upon to consider only the direct shaping of conduct by social inclination, *i. e.*, *vis-a-vis* modification of the will.

The marvelous control of the operator over the hypnotized subject shows how obedient a person in a neuropathic condition may become to impressions from without. But it is likely that most people, quite apart from the hypnotic state, experience a shock when something is suggested. The onset of a perception, idea, or emotion has a real force, and is stayed only by a certain resistance. In children suggestibility is high—a fact which was seized upon by the genius of Guyau and made the corner stone of a scheme of moral education.¹ As the mind develops, how-

¹ GUYAU, *Education and Heredity*, chapters i and ii.

ever, the control of self and the strength of will increase till in hale and firm characters among adults the daily impact of suggestion causes no more tremor than a flight of arrows against an iron-clad. But only the few attain this self-possession; the great mass of adults retain a responsiveness to hints from without that must be taken into account in the social regulation of conduct.

Bodily and mental condition has much to do with suggestibility. Fatigue, disease, and "nerves" lessen the inhibitive power, while mob-madness leads men captive to the impressions of the moment. The *source* of suggestion is, moreover, a vital matter. The peculiar power of certain individuals of authority or prestige to fascinate and impose their wills on the many is well known. The services of this power on behalf of social control will be treated in the paper on "Personality." Two other things to be considered in measuring the importance of suggestion are its *volume* and its *purity*. It is frequent, reiterated, manifold suggestion, suggestion from all sides, from everybody, that wins mastery over the will. As continual tapping with a hammer will break an iron beam, so innumerable mental impacts break down the firmest resolution. It is this cumulative aspect that makes *social suggestion* emanating from the community itself the chief kind to be considered in connection with the conduct of adults. Again the force of a suggestion is vastly lessened if it encounters opposite suggestions that inhibit and block it off. It is therefore social suggestions, *protected from contradiction*, that are most signal in results.

Everything we do confesses the pull exerted by social suggestion. Our choice of food and drink, our style of dress and furniture, our lying down and our getting up, our amusements and our pastimes feel the sway of fashion and vogue. Whatever is common is suggested by way of example or advice or intimation from a hundred directions. In our most private choices we are swerved from our orbit by the solar attraction (or repulsion) of the conventional. Nor is this sway of usage without a dash of control. Break with social practice and there

arises a buzz of insistent suggestion intended to win for the many the homage of your imitation. Fashion becomes vocal and presses itself with considerable emphasis and pertinacity upon the nonconformist.

But social suggestion becomes imperative only in the field where individual and social choices clash, *i. e.*, in the field of conduct, of social behavior. Here from a medium of social influence it becomes an agent of social control and a hand-maiden of morality.

No little care is needed to discriminate between control by suggestion and the fear of public opinion, the ascendancy of what everybody thinks from dread of "what people will think." Nor is it easy to mark the difference between a social standard that one obeys because he feels he must, and a social ideal that one works towards because he has learned to admire it. Again it is necessary to distinguish one's tendency to gravitate towards the social imperative, from his readiness to adopt and to act upon ready-made social judgments.

A concrete case will indicate the true nature of social suggestion. A wife continues to live with a respectable husband for whose person, however, she has an inexpugnable loathing. She is deterred from desertion by no fear of consequences legal or social. She does not dread the disapproval of the community. Her ideal of womanhood does not include unconditional submission. She has no theory of conduct which subordinates personal happiness to abstract virtue. Yet withal she may smother back her repugnance, and sacrifice her impulses to the perpetuity of the marriage tie. Why? Because her impulse is emphatically inhibited by the community will. If the bar to her will is simply the veto of society, as it appears to her through her friends, intimates and associates, she acquiesces with a sense of necessity. If, as is more usual, she yields, not solely to pressure from outside, but rather to the inner tension that results from accumulated past suggestions, ingrained "shalts" and "shalt nots," she succumbs to a feeling of obligation.

The "sense of duty," then, is the emotional state that answers

to the bias the will receives from suggestion. It is not, as Schopenhauer thought, the foreshadow of punishment. It does not symbolize the sway of our ideal over our particular choices, or the rule of principle over impulse. The feeling of oughtness, except when it is the pressure of instinct, is the force of past or present social suggestion working directly on the will. It registers the subjection of the individual's desires and interests to the ascendancy of outsiders.

The extent to which this prevails in anyone depends on whether his individuality is feeble or developed, whether the influences to which he has been exposed are uniform or varied. People of narrow orbit—children, farmers' wives, spinsters, peasants, humble village folk, fishermen, often soldiers and sailors—are slaves to the sense of obligation. Prolonged exposure to a circle or group that speaks always with the same decision the same commands, benumbs the will over whole areas of choice.¹ On the other hand, whatever invigorates the will or reduces the grip of the environment—education, discussion, travel, varied experience, contact with unlike types of men, leadership, new ideas and wants, changes in general opinion, or intellectual progress—undermines the tyranny of group suggestion. In a country neighborhood made up of unlike elements, not crystallized into a close-grained community, the individual counts for much. Likewise in a large city, with many types of belief and sentiment. On the other hand in a military academy, a garrison, a colony, a New England village or a provincial town, the many get the upper hand of the one. Sometimes the coercion is not in the will of the community but in certain traditions. In old colleges, in universities, monasteries, senates, academies, soldiers' homes, ancient families, quiet neighborhoods are traditions that fascinate and profoundly modify the choices of those who come under their influence. So around rank, station, caste, and office cluster powerful precedents and traditions which quickly regulate the conduct of the newly initiated.

¹ Variety is the soul of originality and its only source of supply.—BALDWIN, *Mental Development*, p. 360.

Such are the products of social suggestion. What is its process?

The first noose thrown over the neck of inclination is example. Whatever kind of family type, social manners, neighborly helpfulness, trade practice, business transaction, civic activity, or patriotic sacrifice becomes common tends to draw the practice of individuals in its wake. Standard conduct becomes a fashion, and is imitated as a style of dress is imitated, even at cost to the imitator. To approximate this social pattern is often mere drifting, oars in lap. Consider the difference between succumbing to the prevailing standard and surmounting it. It is the difference between the sinking of the released pendulum to its nadir, and its rising on the other side. Not to deceive the assessor is one thing; to produce overlooked property is another. They are alike in principle, but the latter means much more, because it transcends the ordinary practice. There is one merit of the lawyer who will not cheat his client, a far greater merit of the lawyer who will not cheat the jury about his client. Yet the difference is simply that the one is borne up by the example of his profession, while the other unaided rises above it.

Again there is the force of expectation, which is by no means identical with example. Even if the general practice is low, men pitch high their expectation of how another is going to act. As he who circulates a subscription paper professes to expect much more than there is any hope of getting, so society assumes for each a behavior above the average attainment. The moral sentiments that are applauded on the stage or the platform, that each professes to act on, and that each professes to expect everybody else to act on, by no means underlie actual practice. Yet it is not for a Juvenal or a Zola to abolish this gap between expectation and reality. The satirist has his day, but the generations belong to the optimist. Only in times of moral decay, when society is dropping to pieces, does the cynic give tone to current belief, discussion, and literature. Usually it is the book, the play, the poem, the sermon, the appeal, that takes good instincts for granted, deems the great heart of the people sound, assumes high

motives for right conduct, and finds egoism the abnormal, the exceptional thing, that wins applause and adherence.

The cynic declares that this Fool's Paradise of expectancy is debilitating, that shams rot out the moral fiber of a people, and that our first concern is to see things just as they are. Yet there is something to be said on the other side. The notice "Gentlemen will not spit on the floor," is optimistic, but it gets itself realized. The signal "England expects every man to do his duty," provides no sanction, yet elicits noble effort. "It has been justly said," says Guyau,¹ "that the art of managing the young consists before anything else in assuming them to be as good as they wish themselves to be." "The same principles find their application in the art of governing men. Numerous facts from prison-life show that to treat a half criminal as a great criminal is to urge to crime." The open assumption on the part of everybody that of course everyone is going to be pure, honest, and public-spirited, acts on many men as an imperious suggestion they cannot but obey. Abandon it and you lose a stimulus to right action.

The tonic effect of this atmosphere of illusion may be shown by an analogy. Usually the temper of a social set is more cheerful and buoyant than the average mood of its members. The reason is that in all social intercourse, especially the developed kind, there is a secret understanding that each shall put his best foot foremost and keep his private griefs to himself. Good form bids each tell of his good luck, but not of his misfortunes, report his elations, but conceal his worries, pains, disease, and anguish. Each does this and requires it of the others on penalty of avoidance. The result is that the social atmosphere is charged with an ozone of gaiety, hopefulness, and *joie de vivre* that helps each to bear his private burdens. Why may not a like beneficent illusion create a social atmosphere that will morally brace and buoy up those on the point of yielding to their selfish instincts?

Besides exalting the tone of social suggestion society interposes to exclude counter-suggestion. Knowing better than our

¹ *Education and Heredity*, p. 26.

forefathers the blight of evil example, we set no one in stocks or pillory, veil decently our prisons and prison-discipline from the common gaze, avoid public executions, forbid brutal exhibitions, stamp out the fighting of cocks, dogs, bulls, or men, look after the treatment of car or cab horses, restrict vivisection, confine prostitutes to the back streets, keep our saloons away from the churches and the schoolhouses, and suppress open drunkenness as a public scandal. Furthermore we exact from our public men, as a price of their leadership, a private life that shall offer no stone of stumbling to the foot of weak imitators. The publicity that illumines for the multitude the habits and doings of those in high places compels a close scrutiny of their private as well as their public conduct, and a prompt disowning of those whose example is a danger to the public *morale*.

The suggestion of word is no less an object of concern than the contagion of deed. Our public places have been so looked after that from one end of a great thoroughfare to another we find nothing to remind of vice or crime. From the pulpit, on the platform, in all meetings and social gatherings, it is a grave offense to speak save sparingly and in way of condemnation of aught but that which is pure and of good report. One can trace the purgation more and more clearly as personal relations become social relations. Where two or three are gathered the tongue wags freely. Before twenty, in the sewing circle or the lodge room, one stammers and thinks of the morals of his neighbors. Before a hundred the social *cloture* is in full operation, and to an audience mingled of both sexes and all ages it is always the pontiff and not the man that speaks.

The daily newspaper, in its catering to ever-widening classes, has often become mere printed street gossip, quite oblivious to any suggestive effect. But the recurring agitation for the purifying of the press and the growing clamor for an endowed newspaper, herald the day when judicious selection of news will be exercised in the interest of social morality. Some years ago Mr. Howells complained that American fiction was hobbled because our magazines were constructed always with reference to

the young girl of the American family. That is to say, most of our reading submits to a censorship that reduces it to *littérature pour la jeune fille*. This phrase hints at a striking difference between America and continental Europe in dealing with suggestion. There they establish hothouses in which the young are carefully shut away till their characters are sufficiently formed. As this seclusion makes it less needful to purge the general social atmosphere, there ensues a frankness of expression and a freedom of deed that is startling to us. Here there is little isolation; the young are more and more granted the right to go anywhere and everywhere, and in front of them society vigorously plies the broom. Whatever the American girl invades or touches—religion, politics, literature, art, science, drama, social intercourse, festivity or sport—must be cleansed of evil suggestion, not by a *police des mœurs*, but by the far more pervasive censorship of public opinion.

The immediate effect of all this is to lend to society an outer gloss of respectability that makes decency and courtesy, honesty and public spirit, seem far more common than they are. The innocent can, if they will, tread the mazes of our social life as uncontaminated as they would be in convent or boarding school. Whatever miasma may lurk in the back alleys, the highways are kept decent. The eager air that on the Continent nips adolescent virtue outside the hothouse is here tempered to the immature. Of course this keeping up of appearances in order to purify suggestion is a shining mark to the slings of the cynic and the moral prophet. The cynic wants things to seem as they are, the moral reformer wants things to be as they seem; but both see in the contrast between being and seeming nothing but cowardice, hypocrisy, and moral decadence. Unmindful of the fact that "conventional lies" seem to grow apace with civilization, the veritists proclaim the dogma that the truth can never injure.

But the guarding of social suggestion is justified of its fruits. Arizona girds at New England for hiding vice behind a lustrous varnish of respectability, and lauds her own frankness in regard

to evil doing. Yet Arizona become *mater familias* will assuredly resent the flaunting of anti-social practice, and take steps to purge the atmosphere of the community. Long before hypnotism practical men valued moral tone, and with the maxim *Corrumpunt mores bonos colloquia prava* set about to make the general tide of suggestion favorable to the social nature. The importance of suggestion in the control of the sexual instincts early established a decency and reserve in such matters which is now being extended to other aspects of conduct.

It is not, however, to be forgotten that there are other interests at stake. Life is more than society, welfare is more than virtue. The gyving and gagging of people in their social life may go on till the cost far outweighs the gain. The strong naturally do not want their literature, art, drama, festivity, and sport emasculated on account of the weak. That there are people who, when suicides abound, dare not look at a razor, is a pity; but we cannot go bearded to spare their susceptibilities. Between Puritan tyranny and Restoration profligacy, between Louis Quatorze and Louis Quinze, there must be a wise middle course. Moreover, there is a danger in overmuch coddling of anti-social or defectively social natures. It is as possible to make things too easy for the morally unfit as for the physically unfit, for Puritanism to check the elimination of the former as communism would check the elimination of the latter. The over-zealous guardian of public morals, like Emerson's conservative,¹ "assumes sickness as a necessity, and his social frame as a hospital, his total legislation is for the present distress, a universe in slippers and flannels, with bib and papspoon, swallowing pills and herb tea."

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¹Lecture on The Conservative.