THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART III THE POWERS OF THE INTELLECT

CHAPTER TWELVE:
THE TRIAD OF POWERS, HABITS AND ACTS

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In addition to the anatomical and physiological traits that are the specific properties of the human body, human nature also has a set of innate potentialities for behavior. These potentialities are either active or passive: if active, they*are powers to act in certain ways; if passive, they are receptive to being acted upon in certain ways.

In the history of psychology, the powers of the mind came to be called its "faculties." Treatises in which the analysis of the mind's powers occupied an important place were regarded as "faculty psychology."

The reaction against so called faculty psychology occurred in the nineteenth century, initiated by Johann Herbart, a German psychologist and educator. From that point on, reference to the faculties of the mind gradually disappeared from the literature of psychology. Mention of them evinced a tendency to resurrect the outmoded psychology of Aristotle in antiquity and of his medieval disciple, Thomas Aquinas.

This much touted revolution in psychology, regarded as a dismissal of erroneous ancient shibboleths by corrective modern insights and discoveries, arose from a basic misunderstanding of faculties. The word itself is a term originating with and used by psychologists since the seventeenth century. In the works of Aristotle and Aquinas, dealing with the behavior of living organisms, and especially with the actions of the human mind, the term used was not faculties but powers.

Neither natural powers nor the habits that are acquired modifications of them can be directly observed. In this respect, the powers and habits of the mind are like its cognitive elements, its ideas, when that word is used to cover the cognitive content of the mind—its percepts, memories, images, and concepts. To suppose that ideas are directly observable is the fundamental mistake of modern introspective psychology, from Descartes and Locke down to the end of the nineteenth century and until the first two decades of the present century, when behavioristic psychology first gained a foothold and subsequently replaced introspection. *

*See chapter 2 for a discussion of relevant considerations.

Just as mathematical physicists have come to deny the existence of those aspects of reality that they are not able to measure and thereby feed numbers into their equations, so introspective psychologists in the nineteenth century denied the existence of traits of the human mind that they could not observe introspectively.

At the same time, they mistakenly thought that they were looking directly into their own minds and finding all sorts of mental content there, which they then classified under a variety of headings. It is paradoxical, therefore, that they denied the existence of faculties because they could not introspectively observe them.

But what is not directly observable by one means or another may be inferrable, as the real existence of one's greatgrandparents is inferrable from the direct awareness of one's own existence. It is from the acts or operations of the mind that we can infer both the mind's powers and also the habits that are acquired modifications of those powers.

Powers are potentialities. A habit is the first actualization of a power, determining the direction in which it is disposed to act. When the habit is operative in particular acts, we have an even more determinate actualization of the power to act.

Habits are formed by the repetition of particular acts. They are strengthened by an increase in the number of repeated acts. Habits are also weakened or broken, and contrary habits are formed, by the repetition of contrary acts. Acts of a certain type form or develop an acquired habit to act in a certain way. So different habits are different acquired perfections of a certain innate or natural power to act. In other words, there can be many acts of one habit, and many habits of one power.

Existentially, powers come first, habits second, and habitual actions last; and in origin powers precede acts, and acts precede habits, for it is by the operation of our powers that we form habits. In the behavior of mature human beings, most of the actions performed are habitual. It is very infrequently the case that intellectual action on our part issues directly from one of the intellect's powers that has not yet been habituated to act in a certain way.

The important point to note here is that habit stands in an intermediate position between power and act. From the variety of actions that we perform, we cannot directly infer the variety of powers that we possess, because different types of action may issue from different habitual dispositions of the same power rather than from different powers.

To infer the existence of different powers instead of inferring the existence of different habits will result in the mistake of multiplying the powers of the mind unduly. The number of different acquired habits is much larger than the number of innate or natural powers of the human mind. The unwarranted multiplication of mental powers, or natural faculties of the mind, may have been one cause of the attack upon faculty psychology.

The order in which we learn of the real existence of certain entities is the reverse of the order in which those entities really exist. Natural powers as principles of action precede in existence acquired habits as diverse perfections of those powers. Those acquired habits precede in existence the particular acts or operations in which they issue. But it is by first observing the actions of human beings that we can learn something about their natural powers and their acquired habits, being careful to proceed first from the observation of action to inferences concerning habits, and then proceeding by inference from acquired habits to natural power.

I said earlier that certain contents of the human mind its perceptions, memories, images, and conceptions—are not directly observable by introspection. Other contents such as bodily feelings, emotions, and desires—are elements in the private experience of each individual, and so are introspectively observable by that individual. Turning now from the contents of the human mind to its interior actions or operations, we find that those actions are directly observable as well as inferrable.

When the actions of the human mind issue in overt bodily behavior, that bodily conduct is observable in the same way that other phenomena are observed. From the observation of bodily behavior,

which is the externalization of the mind's interior operations, we can infer the existence of those operations.

Much of that externalization may occur in speech behavior and then the validity of the inference depends on the truthfulness and accuracy of the speaker. Thus, for example, if a person truthfully and accurately reports to us what he has perceived through his senses, we can infer that a certain act of perception has occurred in his mind, and also that that act has produced in him a percept that neither he nor we can directly observe.

However, that person himself can directly observe privately what we cannot directly observe publicly. Each individual can be directly aware of the interior operations or actions of that individual's own mind. For example, I can be directly aware that I am engaged in the act of perceiving some object even though I cannot be directly aware of the percept by which I am perceiving it, but only of the object that I perceptually apprehend.

The percept that is produced by my act of perception is inapprehensible by me, as are all the other cognitive ideas in my mind. But I can be subjectively aware of the noncognitive elements in my private experience, such as bodily feelings, emotions, and desires. In addition, I can have direct awareness of all the actions of my own mind even though I cannot be directly aware of all the contents of my mind that those actions produce, specifically not of the ideas that are among the contents of my mind.

The point that I have just made is true of human beings, and not of other animals, because the human mind is Intellectual and the intellect is reflexive. It knows its own existence reflexively and also its own operations, those operations that are purely intellectual as well as those in which it cooperates, such as sense-perception.
The intellect's reflexive knowledge of its own operations should not be confused with the misguided effort to know introspectively all of the mind's content, its cognitive as well as its noncognitive content.*

*The foregoing discussion elaborates further on the discussion in chapter 2 of the mind's unobservability. There the main point was that the cognitive contents of the mind—its percepts, memories, images, and conceptions—are *that by which* we directly apprehend perceived objects, remembered events, the fictions of the imagination, and the objects of conceptual thought, never *that which* we apprehend.

The way in which we can detect the presence of habits rather than powers is by appealing to one very simple criterion. If the type of observed action from which the inference is being made to either

power or habit occurs in all human beings, then we are justified in inferring the existence of a power rather than a habit. What is common to all human beings must be a property of human nature, not a product of nurture or a result of action by some individuals but not by all. We know that habits are products of nurture.

They result from individual actions by some, but never by all.

For example, some human beings think analytically but not all. The ability to think analytically Is, therefore, an acquired habit not a natural power of the human mind. Faced with alternative options in the sphere of their overt behavior, all human beings choose freely, sometimes if not always. The ability to exercise free choice is, therefore, a natural power of the human mind, not an acquired habit.

I will attempt to apply this criterion for distinguishing between natural powers and acquired habits in the chapters that follow when I deal with the powers, habits, and acts of the human mind. 🕮

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