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What, then, is the difference between good habits and bad? If both are perfections in the basic sense that they are developments of our innate abilities and improvements on the raw nature with which we are born, why are good habits perfections in another sense, while bad habits are corruptions rather than perfections?

—Mortimer Adler



HABITS, GOOD AND BAD *

by Mortimer J. Adler

Looked at one way, all habits are perfections, whether good or bad. They are improvements of the nature we come into this world with. A carpenter improves the raw materials he works with when he fashions a table out of them, even if, being a poor workman, the table he produces is an inferior one. The improvement consists in the carpenter's realizing the wood's potentialities for being shaped into the form of a table.

The human infant at birth is a cornucopia of potentialities, of diverse abilities needing development. The infant at birth cannot walk, speak, feed itself, wash itself, stand up, sit up, not to mention all the other things it cannot do then, which two to five years later it does: read, write, add, question and answer, judge, think. It may not do these very well—in fact, it may do them poorly—but actually being able to do them at all is an improvement on the raw material of undeveloped potentialities that constitute the baby at birth.

The development of a human potentiality is habit formation. Like the potentiality that it develops, the habit is also an ability. At any given moment, we have countless habits that we are not exercising by acting in one way or another. The unexercised habit is *formed* ability to act in a certain way. In contrast, the original, innate potentiality, before developed by habit formation, is an *unformed* ability to act in that way.

It is precisely this difference between two states of the same ability—the unformed state and the formed state—that explains why it can be correctly said that all habits are improvements, even perfections, whether good or bad.

Human beings are endowed at birth with the ability to

speak any language, but then they can actually speak none. By early habit formation, they acquire the formed ability to speak the language of their parents and, subsequently, they may acquire the formed ability to speak another language. Two things should be noted about this. In the first place, their native linguistic ability has been improved by such habit formation, whether they have developed good or bad habits of speech. Second, the habits they have formed are still only abilities, which the habituated persons may or may not be exercising at any given moment.

Attention to these two points enables us to understand the significance of the profound truth that habit is second nature. Habits consist of potentialities for action just as original nature does; but these are acquired, not innate, potentialities; that is why they are second nature.

Of all the actions that we perform every day of our lives, most of them issue from the habits we have formed. Very few of them are acts that exercise a totally unformed native ability. Some of these are the reflex reactions with which we are born, but even these may be conditioned and altered. Some may be spontaneous acts, done for the first time, and as such they do not reflect prior habit formation. Only if the spontaneous act is subsequently repeated again and again does habit formation ensue.

It should be obvious at once that without habit formation, we would be as helpless as the infant in the cradle. Without habit formation, we would have to act spontaneously on every occasion, or deliberately think out what we are about to do and decide each time on how to do it. Think of dressing and undressing every day without habits of doing so; think of doing any sort of work, engaging in any sort of play, driving a car, cooking a meal, and so on, without habits of doing so.

We recoil from the thought with horror, and rightly so. Human life without habit formation would be a nightmare. All the powers inherent in our human nature at birth would be as naught unless and until they are overlaid by habit and

become our second nature.

How do we form habits? Let me answer that question by first considering all our bodily habits, all of which are acquired skills in the use of our bodily powers. Every habit of bodily performance is an acquired skill, from simple skills, such as the one that determines how we walk or how we position our body in one posture or another, to much more complex skills, such as those that determine how we play any athletic game, or perform any artistic act—sing, play a musical instrument, write a letter.

By mentioning these more complex bodily skills along with the much simpler ones, I am calling attention to the fact that all skills acquired by habit have a mental as well as a physical aspect. There are some purely mental skills, but all those mentioned above are skills of both body and mind. The simpler ones have a larger bodily aspect; the more complex ones, a larger mental aspect. All of them have both in varying degrees.

Regardless of where they fall in the spectrum of skills, the habits by which we acquire them are formed by the repetition of actions. By doing it over and over again, we learn how to walk in a certain way. By standing up straight every time we have to stand, instead of slouching, we form that habit of posture instead of the opposite. By repeating again and again the actions prescribed by our tennis coach, our piano or violin teacher, we form the habit that constitutes the skill aimed at by our coach, trainer, or teacher.

In the course of such training, our preceptor may stop us and say, “Don’t do it that way, do it this way,” or just, “Stop doing it that way; now try doing it again the right way.” Only if we follow instructions will we form the habit—the skill—that is the object of the exercise.

Habit formation is like the programming of computers, but with a difference. The reflex reactions with which we are born comprise our innate programming—something that nature provides, for which we have no responsibility. All the

habits we form ourselves are acquired programming. Whereas computers are always programmed by others, our voluntary habit formation consists in self-programming, even when it is under the direction of coaches, trainers, or teachers. We can always choose to follow their directions or not. All habits are, in this sense, voluntarily formed by the persons who acquire them. They result from free choices on their part.

A habit, once formed, can be broken in just the same way that it was formed—by repeated acts on our part, only now acts of an opposite sort. Instead of taking another cigarette or another strong drink, we refuse it, and substitute some other act for it. Similarly, in breaking the bad habit of stroking a tennis ball with our eyes somewhere else, we keep our eyes on the ball time and time again. Bad habits, in short, are broken in the same way that good habits are formed.

What, then, is the difference between good habits and bad? If both are perfections in the basic sense that they are developments of our innate abilities and improvements on the raw nature with which we are born, why are good habits perfections in another sense, while bad habits are corruptions rather than perfections?

The only answer to this question should be obvious at once. Habits are good, and therefore perfections, if they develop us in the right direction, the direction we ought to follow. They are bad, and therefore corruptions, if they develop us in the wrong direction, the direction we ought to avoid. But what is the direction we ought to follow and the direction we ought to avoid?

The direction we ought to follow in our habit formation is one that accords with the rules for acting well. The truth of this is easiest to see in the case of any skill or art. I will postpone for a moment the types of habit formation which do not result in skills, concerning which it is more difficult to explain the criteria that divide right from wrong directions and good from bad habits.

In the case of any skill, technique, or art (the three words just used are all synonyms), the rules of the skill or art prescribe the right actions to be performed. The rules for driving an automobile, the rules for baking a cake, the rules for hemming a dress, the rules for making a bed, to take the simplest examples, all prescribe the right way of doing these things. By following such rules, and also by avoiding actions that the rules proscribe or prohibit, we form good habits. What is true of these rules is equally true of the rules of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, or the rules set forth in tennis manuals and other “how to” books that deal with sports and games.

I have written such books, concerned with reading, speaking, listening, and thinking, and I know that laying down the rules does not produce the desired good habits. Nor does learning the rules, being able to recite them in an orderly fashion, or even understanding them well. I have taught logic to students who could pass an examination that tested whether or not they knew and understood the rules. Those same students, put to another test, plainly revealed that they could not think logically and avoid logical errors.

Why? Because knowing and understanding rules of any sort that prescribe the right acts and proscribe the wrong ones do not form habits. Habits are formed by acting repeatedly in accordance with the rules, and *in no other way*. What I have just said is as true of moral habits as the habits of any art or skill. Knowing and understanding moral rules or ethical precepts does not produce a person of good moral character. One can pass an examination in moral philosophy and still be a scoundrel, knave, or villain.

A moral philosophy or a code of ethics that relies solely on obedience to the rules it sets forth for the result it aims at is totally unpragmatic. It is likely to be worse—unsound and dogmatic. Only a moral philosophy that prescribes the formation of good habits of conduct is undogmatic, sound, and truly practical. Extraordinary as this may seem, the only two moral philosophers who make habit formation, not

obedience to rules, the center of their teaching are John Dewey in our own day and Aristotle in antiquity.

Though rules that direct acts to be done or avoided underlie habit formation, in the case of moral conduct as well as in the case of skilled performances of all sorts, once persons form the right habits, they not only can forget the rules, they also usually do forget them. They become unconscious of them in the execution of the habits they have formed.

* From his book A Vision of the Future (1984)

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As always, we welcome your comments.

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