

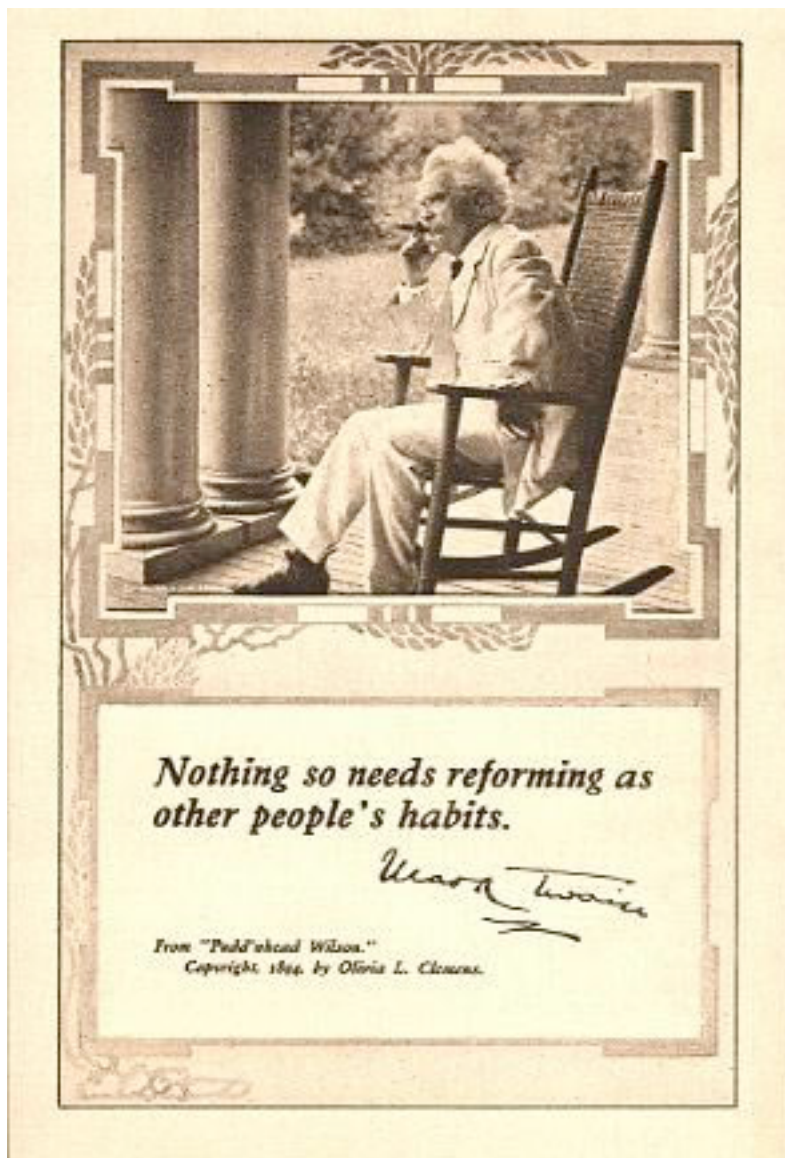
---

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

---

July '02

Nº 182



---

---

## MAKE IT A HABIT

By Robert Maynard Hutchins

**T**he object of education is the production of virtue; for virtue is that which makes a man good and his work good, too. As virtue makes a man and his work good, so also it makes him happy, for happiness is activity in accordance with virtue. As virtue makes a man good and makes him happy, so also it makes him a good citizen, and this is the aim of general or liberal education. The four cardinal virtues are justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude, and one description of them is that they are social virtues, the virtues that good living in society requires.

The virtues are habits, and are acquired, like other habits, by doing certain acts. A man becomes just by doing just acts, temperate by being temperate, and brave by acting bravely. One cannot become good merely by listening to lectures on moral philosophy, any more than one can become a famous violin player or tennis champion by reading textbooks. The beginnings of those habits which are the moral virtues are found in the training received in childhood. It is unlikely that a college student can acquire them for the first time in college; for when he has reached that age he has already committed so many acts that his habits, good and bad, are formed.

Nevertheless, habits may be lost, corrupted, or diminished. The violin player who stops playing and the tennis champion who stops practicing will soon fall from their lofty eminence. And though the moral virtues are among the most durable of all goods, they, like other habits, may be lost, and for the same reasons. Thus an educational institution will wish to confirm and support the moral virtues of its students and modify their vices. As we have seen, instruction in how to be good is not likely to be effective. The students must act, and act in such a way as to strengthen their virtues and weaken their vices.

In this effort at some level of education, instruction in moral philosophy has a part to play. If the habits formed through training in childhood are to survive, they must be sustained by reason. All education swings round the ancient dictum that man is a rational animal. He may be trained in infancy as animals are trained, but as he becomes a man his reason must understand and approve his actions; for in the order of human powers reason rules.

It is here that we see the connection between the moral and the intellectual virtues. As the object of the moral virtues is the good, so the object of the intellectual virtues is the truth. The moral virtues depend upon prudence, which is practical wisdom. If a man is to do good actions, he must do them from choice and not from impulse or by accident. Correct choice depends on the determination of the right end and of the right means of obtaining it. Through the moral virtues our desires and appetites are perfected so that we select the proper ends.

The great and specific contribution that a college or university can make to the development of virtue is in supplying the rational basis for it, that is, in developing the intellectual virtues. Wisdom, science, and understanding, the three speculative virtues, and prudence, the good habit of the practical intellect, must be the focus of a university's educational endeavor. They are the criterion of teaching and research. The test of a good course is not whether it is amusing or informational or seems to contribute to financial success, any more than the test of a good research project is whether it is expensive and elaborate and produces large literary poundage. The real test of instruction or research is whether it has high intellectual content and demands intellectual effort. Otherwise it has no place in a university, for it cannot assist in forming those habits which a university education is designed to foster.

If we turn to the production of good citizens, we see that democracy rests on the assumption that the citizens will be intelligent. This means that their education must assist them in learning how to think and get them into the habit of doing it. Their intellects must be disciplined. They must know how to read, to listen, to write, and to speak. They must have standards of judging thinking, including their own. They must know the difference between honest thinking and sophistry and between reasoning and rationalization. Only by disciplines that teach them these differences can they hope to resist the demagogue and the propagandist.

They must understand, too, the nature of man and the nature of political society, for otherwise they will not be good men or good members of a political society. They must be good and wise in respect to their own ends and in their relations with other men. If they are, they will understand that the good life can be led only in a political society, and that such a society is an organization designed to promote the common good. The common good is that condition of peace, order, and economic sufficiency which provides hap-

piness for all to the degree to which they can participate in it. Happiness is activity in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues, that is, good moral and intellectual habits.

The economic and social injustice of our times results from the weakness or absence of the moral and intellectual virtues, which, as we have seen, are interdependent. Economic and social injustice does not result from lack of information, lack of natural resources, or any failure of technology. We are plentifully supplied with all three. No, the principal issue of our day is a moral and intellectual one. The great problems of labor, capital, the Constitution, the judiciary, communism, fascism, war and peace revolve around fundamental questions which every student ought to face intelligently, questions affecting the ends of economic activity, of organized society, and of human life.

Yet it is possible to graduate from many colleges and universities without being compelled to face such questions and without the disciplines which would be needed to face them intelligently. Higher education must share the blame for the condition in which we find ourselves.

*Robert M. Hutchins (1899-1977) - president of the University of Chicago. This article is excerpted from the April 22, 1938 issue of Commonweal.*

---

---

## THE FORMATION OF HABITS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We hear so much about the power of habit in human life. William James says it is "the flywheel of society," and Aristotle calls it "second nature." But what is this powerful influence called "habit"? And why is it so important in our lives?*

*B. H.*

*Dear B. H.,*

LET ME BEGIN BY EXPLAINING ARISTOTLE'S famous statement that habit is second nature. Habits are additions to the nature with which we are born. We are born with the power or ability to act in certain ways and also with certain innate patterns of action, which are called instinct or reflexes. Our innate tendencies to action can be

developed and formed by what we actually do in the course of living. Such developments or formations are habits.

For example, we have an innate capacity for a great many different kinds of action in which skill can be acquired by practice. We learn to talk grammatically; we learn to think logically; we learn to cook or drive a car; we learn to ice skate or play tennis. In each case the learning results in an acquired skill which is a habit. In each case the habit actually gives us an ability which was only potential in us at birth.

That is why Aristotle calls habit second nature. Our original nature consists of capacities which can be developed or perfected by learning or experience. The development or perfection of those capacities supplements our original nature and thus constitutes a “second”—an added or acquired—nature.

Our need to form habits arises from the fact that, unlike the lower animals, we are not born with instinctive patterns of behavior adequate for the conduct of life. What certain animals can do instinctively, we have to learn to do. Instincts are, in a sense, innate or natural habits, just as human habits are acquired or second nature.

Our original nature—our innate equipment—is fixed for life, though it is subject to modifications of all sorts. The habits we form, which modify our original nature, also have a certain stability, though they, too, are subject to alteration. We can strengthen our habits, weaken them, or break them entirely and supplant them by others. Like our original nature, our second nature—our repertoire of habits—gives each of us the particular character he has at a given stage of life. If you know a man’s habits, you can predict with some assurance what he is likely to do.

So far we have been talking about the individual. Common habits of thought and action in a community, the “ways” of a people, are usually called customs. Custom keeps things on an even keel in a society. It enables the common life to go on harmoniously. It smoothes the way for interchange between individuals and holds them together. We never feel at home in a new place until we’ve become accustomed to its customs and made them our own.

That is what William James means in calling habit “the enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.” (A flywheel by its inertia keeps the engine going at a uniform speed

and compensates for torque.)

James applies this insight to social status as well as to personal habits. He says that our occupational mannerisms become so set by the time we are thirty that most of us become perfectly satisfied with our place in life and our function in the social machine. James also insists that our personal tastes, and our habits of speech, thought, and social behavior, are relatively fixed by the time we are twenty, so that we are kept in our social orbit by a law as strong as gravitation.

However, it is important to remember that it is never impossible to shake off an old habit and form a new one. Once a habit has been acquired, it has almost compulsive power over us. But human habits are freely acquired by the choices we make, and can be got rid of and replaced by making other choices. No habit, no matter how strong, ever abolishes our freedom to change it. This is the lesson of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (or *My Fair Lady*), a delightful dramatization of the power to change habits. Liza Doolittle can and does learn to speak like a lady.

From his book ***Great Ideas from the Great Books.***

---

---

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hello!

Thank you for the welcome message and am glad to be a member. I am perusing the material on your website, and past issues of The Great Ideas Online.

I started reading fulltime, every day, the great books about 2 years ago, trying to liberally educate myself. I read the books alone all day; I am not attending any particular college, since I am married and my nights are spent with family duties. I now realize that without discussing the things I read, I am getting only a small fragment of the benefit of the books.

My question: Does anyone in your organization know of any other adult in my situation, who is trying to liberally educate himself (preferably fulltime), who would be interested in discussing these readings over the phone or online? I am desperate to discuss these ideas with someone on a regular basis, weekly or even daily.

(I even tried to apply as a student at Angelicum, but they do not take adults).

Any help would be appreciated.

Thanks,

Dean Loew — loew@rea-alp.com

---

---

## **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**Alfonso A. Campbell**

\*\*\*\*\*

### **THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE**

is published weekly for its members by the  
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas  
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer Adler & Max Weismann  
Max Weismann, Publisher & Editor  
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com  
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org  
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.