

A
MANUAL OF PSYCHOLOGY

George Frederick 1860 -
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CHAPTER X.

VOLUNTARY DECISION.

§ 1. *Ascending Levels of Conative Development.*—Conative development is inseparably connected with cognitive development. If we consider conation in the abstract, we can distinguish its positive from its negative phase,—appetition from aversion. We can also distinguish its varying degrees of intensity and persistence and its feeling-tone. But beyond this all differentiation of conative consciousness is differentiation of cognitive consciousness. This does not imply that conation is secondary to and dependent upon cognition. The whole course of exposition in this work refutes such an assumption. What is meant is rather that conation and cognition are different aspects of one and the same process. Cognition gives the process its determinate character: without conation there would be no process at all to have a character.

From this point of view, we may distinguish different levels of conative process as connected with different levels of general mental development. On the plane of perception we have the perceptual impulse; this includes instinctive impulses. Its general characteristic is that the activity involved in it finds immediate expression in bodily movement guided by external impressions.

The perceptual impulse without losing its essential character may involve a certain amount of ideal anticipation. But we reach a distinctly higher plane when ideas

become "sufficiently self-sustaining to form trains that are not wholly shaped by the circumstances of the present." "We can desire to live again through experiences of which there is nothing actually present to remind us."¹ The mere ideal representation of an end may be the primary starting-point of an activity directed to its realisation; and this activity may itself partly or wholly take the form of trains of ideas. It is at this stage that the word *desire* has its most appropriate application. Perceptual conations are better described as impulses.

With the development of ideational thought, higher forms of desire arise. The process of generalisation brings with it generalised conative tendencies. We aim at the fulfilment of rules of conduct instead of the production of this or that special result in this or that particular case. Ideal construction sets before us ends which have never been previously realised. These ends may be so complex that they can only be realised gradually by activities persistently renewed as opportunity allows. The writing of a book, and sometimes the reading of it, may serve as an example. Sometimes the ideally constructed ends are such as the individual recognises to be unattainable in his own lifetime. He can only contribute his share towards bringing them to pass. Sometimes there is a doubt whether they can be completely attained, or even a certainty that they cannot be completely attained. Ends of this last kind are the highest, and are generally called "ideals."

§ 2. *Conative Aspect of the Conception of the Self.*—Under the concept of the Self as expressed in the word "I" is included in systematic unity the life-history of the individual, past, present, and future, as it appears to himself and to others; together with all its possible or ima-

¹ Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 588.

ginary developments. We have already described the way in which this complex ideal construction grows up. We have now to point out that its evolution accounts for the origin of Will in the strict sense of the word, as implying deliberation and choice.

Voluntary action is to be sharply discriminated from impulsive action, and deliberation from conflict of impulsive tendencies. The difference is, that in impulse action follows the isolated conative tendency; whereas in voluntary decision special conations and their ends are first considered in their relation to the total system of tendencies included in the conception of the Self. When two disconnected impulses simultaneously prompt to incompatible courses of action, if the conception of Self does not come into play, one interferes with the other in a quasi-mechanical way. There is merely a trial of brute strength between them. Instances are sometimes found in young children and animals. The characteristic expression of their mental state is a sort of oscillation between two modes of action, each of which is begun in turn and then gives place to the other. "When a young child suddenly comes face to face with a strange dog, the impulse towards . . . and the impulse away from . . . are realised in quick succession. The child goes up to the dog, runs back to its father, approaches the dog again, and so on."¹ Professor Titchener tells us that "in face of the two impulses, (1) to shut a door on the right hand, and (2) to seat himself at his typewriter-table on the left," he actually began "a right-hand movement towards the door and then all at once" slued round "to the typewriter, without having closed it."² All of us can no doubt recall similar experiences.

¹ Titchener, *Primer of Psychology*, p. 246.

² *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Deliberation in no way resembles this alternate jerking in opposite directions, as if pulled by a string, and the decision which follows it is not a mere triumph in strength of one isolated impulse over another. Voluntary action does not follow either of the conflicting tendencies, as such; it follows our preference of the one to the other. It is the conception of the Self as agent which makes the difference. The alternative is not "this?" or "that?" but "shall I do this?" or "shall I do that?" Each line of action with its results is considered not in isolation but as part of the ideally constructed whole for which the word "I" stands. The impulse of the present moment belongs to the Self of the present moment; but this is only a transient phase of the total Self. If the impulse is realised the completed action will take its place as a component part of the life-history of the individual. He may live to regret it. In his present mood, with bottle and glass before him, he may desire to get drunk; but sobriety may have been the habit and principle of a lifetime. If he yields to temptation, the remembrance of the act will stand out in painful conflict with his normal tendencies. He will be unable to think of it without a pang. This incompatibility between the normal Self and the present impulse, if vividly enough realised at the moment of temptation, will restrain him from drinking. If it is not sufficient, further developments of the conception of Self may be more efficacious. He may think of himself as churchwarden or elder; he may think of the ideal aspirations of his better moments; he may call to mind the thought of himself as reflected in other minds,—the dead friend who expected so much from him, and who would be so shocked at his lapse,—the talk of the general public conceived as pitying, contemptuous, or malicious. He may even consider how he would like to look back to such an episode on his death-bed. Ob-

§ 4. Voluntary Decision.—The phrase *voluntary decision* is ambiguous. It may mean the transition from the state of suspense to the state of resolution; or it may mean the state of resolution when it has once been attained. It will be simplest to treat first the decision as already formed, the state of being resolved. The most obvious difference between the state of indecision and that of decision is that in the first we do not know what we are going to do, and that in the second we do know what we are going to do. While deliberating, we are making up our mind, and we do not know what our mind is going to be. When we have formed a decision, we have come to know our own minds. The conception of the Self has become fixed where it was previously indeterminate. The realisation of one line of conative tendency is now definitely anticipated as part of our future life-history, so far at least as external conditions will allow of its execution. Opposing conative tendencies either cease to operate, or they appear only as difficulties or obstacles in the way of carrying out our decision. They are no longer regarded as possible motives of action. We have come to the settled belief that, so far as we are concerned in our present state of mind, the lines of action to which they prompt will not be carried out. They are thus placed outside the sphere of deliberation, and in consequence cease to be motives. If they persist at all, they merely serve to make the execution of our voluntary decision more painful and difficult. But they do not on that account impair the strength of this decision; on the contrary, they may only give an opportunity for exhibiting the strength of the decision. With the full emergence of the decision, the conflict of motives, as such, ceases. "This termination of the struggle does not merely mean that one impulse or group of impulses has turned out to be stronger than its opponents. It might conceivably manifest its superior

strength without a cessation of conflict. When two unequal and opposite forces are applied to a particle, the particle will move in the direction of the stronger force; but the action of the weaker force still continues to manifest itself in a diminution of velocity. The triumph of the voluntary impulse is not of this kind. In a perfect volition, opposing impulses are not merely held in check; they are driven out of the field. If they continue to exist, they do so as external obstacles to a volition already formed. They are no longer motives; they are on the same footing with any other difficulty in the way of attainment."¹

On the other hand, the motives which in the process of deliberation arrayed themselves on the side of the course of action that actually comes to be adopted persist after deliberation is over, as the recognised motives of the voluntary decision. We will the act, because we desire it, or at least have an aversion to omitting it, or to its alternatives. Thus, the state of voluntary decision may be analysed as follows: (1) there is the belief that so far as in us lies we are going to carry out a certain course of action; (2) this belief is founded on that kind of reason which we call a motive. It is recognised as having its ground in our present conative tendencies. Thus we may define a Volition as a desire qualified and defined by the judgment that so far as in us lies we shall bring about the attainment of the desired end because we desire it.

§ 5. The Forming of a Decision.—We have yet to examine how the state of decision supervenes on that of deliberation. At this point the vexed question of *free-will*, as it is called, arises. According to the libertarians, the decision, at least in some cases, involves the intervention of a new factor,

¹ Article by author on "Voluntary Action," *Mind*, N.S., vol. v., No. 19, p. 357.

not present in the previous process of deliberation, and not traceable to the constitution of the individual as determined by heredity and past experience. The opponents of the libertarians say that the decision is the natural outcome of conditions operating in the process of deliberation itself. There is according to them no new factor which abruptly emerges like a Jack-in-the-box in the moment of deciding.

Now it must be admitted that the transition from the state of indecision to that of decision is often obscure, and that it frequently appears to be unaccountably abrupt. This makes it difficult or impossible to give a definite disproof of the libertarian hypothesis on psychological grounds. But certainly the *onus probandi* rests with those who maintain the intervention of a new factor which is not a development or outcome of previous conditions. If we cannot definitely disprove the presence of such a factor, we can at least say that the facts are far from compelling us to assume its existence.

Deliberation may be regarded as a state of unstable equilibrium. The mind oscillates between alternatives. First one conative tendency becomes relatively dominant, and then another. The play of motives passes through all kinds of vicissitudes, as the alternative courses of action and their consequences are more fully apprehended in relation to the Self. As the process advances, equilibrium tends to be restored. New developments of conative tendency cease to take place; deliberation comes to a standstill because it has done its work. In this relatively stationary condition, it may be that one of the alternatives, with the motives for it, has a decided and persistent predominance in consciousness, so that the mind no longer tends to revert to the others. At this point the mind is made up, and the result is formulated in the judgment, "I will do this rather than that."

But there are other cases which present more difficulty. It may happen that deliberation comes to a standstill without any one alternative acquiring a definite predominance. The mind tends first to one and then to the other without result. No new developments occur which tend to give a superiority to either, and the result is hopeless suspense. It would seem that under these conditions no voluntary decision ought to supervene, or if it does supervene, it must be due to the intervention of a new factor and is not merely the outcome of the deliberative process. Now as a matter of fact we find that under such conditions voluntary decisions frequently do come into existence. They may even be of wide-reaching importance, like Caesar's determination to cross the Rubicon. But probably in all such instances one or both of two traceable and recognisable conditions of a psychological kind are operative. These are (1) aversion to the continuance of painful suspense, and (2) the necessity for action of some kind. "It may be that though we are at a loss to decide between two courses of action, we are none the less fully determined not to remain inactive. Inaction may be obviously worse than either of the alternative lines of conduct. We may then choose one of them much in the same way as we take a cigar out of a box, when it is no matter which we select."¹ In view of the necessity for action, a comparatively slight predominance of the motives for one alternative may be sufficient to determine decision, though it would have been ineffective under other conditions. Or again, being pressed to decide, either by aversion to the state of irresolution, or by the necessity for doing something, we may simply adopt the course which seems to be uppermost in our minds at the moment,

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 364.

although we have no confidence that it would remain uppermost if we continued to deliberate. Or we may mentally consent to allow the decision to be determined by some irrelevant circumstance such as the fall of a penny. We determine that if heads turn up we shall do *A*, and that if tails turn up we shall do *B*. Curiously enough, the reverse frequently happens. If heads turn up we do *B*, and if tails turn up we do *A*. This is due in part to an aversion to having one's conduct determined in such an arbitrary and irrelevant way. But it often happens that immediately after the appeal to chance has been made, and has issued in favour of one alternative, the motives for the other alternative are mentally set in contrast, not with the opposing motives present in preceding deliberation, but with the trivial result of the appeal to chance. They thus acquire a momentary predominance which determines voluntary decision.

Sometimes volition takes place before the process of deliberation has fully worked itself out. In this way, acts come to be decided on which would have been suppressed if they had been more fully considered. Here again, the necessity for acting in some way, and impatience of the state of indecision, are operative factors. But the reason often lies in the intensity of some impulse of the present Self which derives its strength, not from its relation to the total system of conduct, but from the circumstances of the moment.

In the vicissitudes through which the process of deliberation passes, it will often happen that this isolated impulse through its momentary intensity will acquire such a predominance as to arrest the full development of other motives, which, if they had come into play, would have given rise to a different decision. The decision which thus takes place after imperfect deliberation is

generally called impulsive. It is not supposed to be voluntary in the same degree as that which takes place after fuller deliberation. The agent often commits the act knowing that he will live to repent it. Most cases of yielding to temptation are cases of deliberation arrested and cut short by the transient strength of a present impulse. It is in such instances that the agent is most keenly aware in retrospect that he might have acted otherwise than he actually did. He feels that the act does not fully represent his true self. If he had fully developed all the motives which were inoperative owing to imperfect deliberation, the momentary impulse might have been suppressed instead of realised.

§ 6. Fixity of Voluntary Decision.—The persistence with which a voluntary decision, when once formed, maintains itself against obstacles is often much greater than can be accounted for by the strength of the desire which was its motive at the outset. There are many reasons for this. One is that the line of conduct determined on is identified with the conception of Self. "When I judge that in so far as in me lies I shall realise a certain end, the endeavour to realise that end becomes *ipso facto* an integral part of the conception of myself. Failure to realise it is regarded as *my* failure, *my* defeat. Thus volition becomes strengthened in the face of obstacles by all the combative emotions. These are of varying kinds and of varying degrees of strength in different individuals; but all tendencies to hold out or struggle against opposition, merely because it is opposition, are enlisted in the service of the will, inasmuch as the idea of the line of conduct willed is an integral part of the idea of Self."¹

"The fixity of will is also strengthened, often in a very

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 358.

high degree, by aversion to the state of irresolution. Suspense is in itself disagreeable; and when we have emerged from it by a voluntary decision, we shrink from lapsing into it once more. Besides this, prolonged and repeated indecision is highly detrimental in the general conduct of life. The man who knows his own mind is far more efficient than the man who is always wavering. Hence in most persons there is a strong tendency to abide by a resolution, just because it is a resolution. This tendency is greatly strengthened by social relations. If we are weak and vacillating, no one will depend upon us; we shall be viewed with a kind of contempt. Mere vanity may go far to give fixity to the will."¹

Volition also becomes fixed by the action which follows on it. So soon as we have attained the settled belief that we are going to follow out a certain line of conduct, we immediately begin to adapt our thoughts and deeds to this belief. We thus come to be more and more *committed* to the course determined on. To withdraw from it would be to disturb our arrangements; to baulk expectations raised in others; and to arrest the general flow of our own mental activity. The more the mind has become set on one thing, the more it would be upset by being diverted to another. If I have once decided on going to New Guinea to investigate the manners and customs of savages, instead of staying at home to lecture on psychology, the whole direction of my mental activity flows into channels corresponding with my preformed resolution. I begin to read up books about savage tribes and about New Guinea in particular. The arrangements for my outfit and voyage, the kind of work I am going to do, the kind of adventures I shall meet with, the men I am to co-operate with, and

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

other topics such as these, engross my mind. The more advanced this process is the greater fixity does my volition acquire. "To disturb it is to disturb the whole system of tendencies with which it has become interwoven. In this way I commit myself to such an extent that it becomes impossible to draw back."¹

Perhaps the fixity of volition is not adequately accounted for by reasons such as these. There appear to be individual differences in this respect which depend upon inherited constitution, so that they cannot be explained by psychological generalities. In some men infirmity of purpose appears to be innate. They change like a weathercock, and can never be relied on. Others follow up their voluntary resolutions with a dogged persistence which is often utterly unreasonable. Some men are born obstinate, and others vacillating.

§ 7. "Action in the Line of Greatest Resistance."—Some volitions take place and are maintained only by an effort. This is especially the case when voluntary decision follows some general principle of conduct or some ideal aim, in opposition to an intense impulse of the present Self which is excited and maintained by the actual conditions existing at the time. Professor James has laid great emphasis on this experience. "We *feel*, in all hard cases of volition, as if the line taken, when the rarer and more ideal motives prevail, were the line of greater resistance, and as if the line of coarser motivation were the more pervious and easy one, even at the very moment when we refuse to follow it. He who under the surgeon's knife represses cries of pain, or he who exposes himself to social obloquy for duty's sake, feels as if he were following the line of greatest temporary resistance. He speaks of con-

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 358.

quering and overcoming his impulses and temptations. But the sluggard, the drunkard, the coward, never talk of their conduct in that way or say they resist their energy, overcome their sobriety, conquer their courage, and so forth."¹

There can be no doubt that Professor James here describes the facts accurately. But he proceeds to interpret them as evidence in favour of the libertarian view. If volition is merely the outcome of preceding psychological conditions, it must follow the line of least resistance, but in the cases described it follows the line of the greatest resistance. This would seem to imply the intervention of a new factor. Before admitting this conclusion, we must analyse more carefully the experience on which it is based.

We said in § 4 that when a voluntary decision was once formed, "opposing conative tendencies either cease to operate, or they appear only as difficulties or obstacles in the way of carrying out our decision." The disappearance of opposing tendencies, on the one hand, or their persistence as obstacles, on the other, are the two alternatives which correspond to action in the line of least resistance and in the line of greatest resistance. Now whether they persist or disappear depends upon the presence or absence of circumstances over which we have no control. The simplest case is that in which we voluntarily decide in opposition to some present organic craving, such as the craving for drink. The craving itself is maintained by organic conditions which continue to operate both in the very moment of decision and after the decision is made. Thus, to use the phraseology of Professor James, the volition is "hard" because it is both formed and carried out against a persistent obstacle. On the other hand, if

¹ *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., p. 548.

the decision is in favour of indulging the animal appetite, counter motives tend to disappear altogether, instead of persisting as obstacles. They are not maintained by organic conditions, nor are they obtruded on the mind by any other circumstances. As soon as the man has given way to temptation and begins to drink, he loses sight of the considerations which had previously tended to restrain him. Besides this, the drink itself, if he takes enough of it, soon obliterates any lingering traces of reluctance. Thus in resolving to drink the man certainly decides in the direction of least resistance; indeed, there may be virtually no resistance at all. On the other hand, in deciding to restrain his appetite, he decides in the direction of greatest resistance, because the appetite itself still persists after his decision.

The case is not essentially dissimilar when the persistence of motives as obstacles is due to other circumstances. The interests opposed to the course of action adopted may be so complex, they may play so large a part in our life, that they continue to obtrude themselves upon us even when we are deciding or have decided that their realisation is not to be identified with our conception of the future Self. They thus persist as obstacles in the moment of resolution, and after resolution. Regulus, in determining to return to Carthage, could hardly dismiss from his thoughts all that he was giving up and the violent death which awaited him. Perhaps if he had decided to remain at Rome, his mental conflict would have been much less acute. Surrounded by family and friends, and with all kinds of congenial channels open for his activity, he would probably have been able to a large extent to avoid dwelling on the thought of his violated promise.

If this analysis be correct, cases of "hard" volition do not show that, in the process which leads up to a decision,

the weaker motives triumph. We must carefully separate two questions. The first is, How does the voluntary decision issue out of the previous process of deliberation? The other is, How far do opposing tendencies become operative when the voluntary decision is made? In proportion as they remain operative, they constitute obstacles and render volition "hard." But this has nothing to do with the psychological conditions which determine the volition. It in no way proves that these conditions are not adequate, and that a new factor such as the libertarians assume is required to account for the result.

§ 8. Volition and Bodily Activity.—A voluntary decision is normally followed by action which carries or tends to carry it into effect. Setting aside for the present the case of voluntary attention, where the will merely determines the direction of thought, we have here to consider the relation between volition and bodily movement.

Motor efficacy is not essential to the state of voluntary decision as a psychical fact. "The question as to the nature of a certain mode of consciousness is quite independent of the question whether or not this mode of consciousness will be followed by a certain train of occurrences in the organism and in the environment. If I will to produce an explosion by applying a lighted match to gunpowder, my volition is none the less a volition because in the course of its execution the match goes out or the powder proves to be damp. Similarly the volition is none the less a volition if it turns out that my muscular apparatus refuses to act, or acts in a way contrary to my intention. The connexion between certain modes of consciousness and corresponding movements of the limbs is necessary to the maintenance of our existence; but it does not enter into the constitution of the conscious state which precedes the executive series of occurrences. When the conscious state

is one of volition, it is necessary that the subject should look forward to the bodily movements, either as practically certain or at least as possible. A belief of this kind is an essential ingredient of the voluntary attitude. But the existence of the belief is in itself sufficient. Its truth or falsehood is a matter of indifference. In a precisely analogous way we must, in determining to produce a gunpowder explosion, assume that the powder is or may be dry enough to take fire. But it is by no means necessary that the gunpowder in point of fact should be dry."¹

Normally, however, volition is followed by corresponding movements. How does this take place? Professor James has supplied what appears to be a satisfactory answer to this question. The passage of volition into movement is according to him a special case of the general tendency of ideas to act themselves out. The mere representation of an action tends to give rise to the action itself, and will do so in the absence of interfering conditions. "Try to feel as if you were crooking your finger, whilst keeping it straight. In a minute it will fairly tingle with the imaginary change of position; yet it will not sensibly move, because *its not really moving* is also a part of what you have in mind. Drop *this* idea, think of the movement purely and simply, with all brakes off, and, presto! it takes place with no effort at all."²

It very frequently happens that ideas pass into action without preceding volition. "Whilst talking I become conscious of a pin on the floor or of some dust on my sleeve. Without interrupting the conversation I brush away the dust or pick up the pin. I make no express resolve, but the mere perception of the object and the

¹ Article by author on "Voluntary Action," *Mind*, N.S., vol. v., No. 19, p. 355.

² *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., p. 527.

fleeting notion of the act seem of themselves to bring the latter about."¹ Experiences of this kind are very common. We have already had occasion to dwell on the tendency of ideas to express themselves in imitative gestures; and in that connection we adduced other evidence to show that ideas tend to act themselves out in proportion to their vividness and dominance in consciousness.

We now turn to the special case of volition. Volition is normally followed by movement, because the voluntary decision gives to the representation of the act decided on a settled predominance in consciousness as against the representations of alternative courses. This is Professor James's account of the matter, but it seems possible to push analysis somewhat further, so as to show how the predominance arises. During the process of deliberation, the subject is as yet uncertain what he is going to do. Incompatible courses of action are ideally represented as possible alternatives. With the voluntary decision comes the belief that one of them is to be carried out to the exclusion of the others. It is this belief which gives to the idea of the action the predominance leading to its execution.

This is perhaps best illustrated by what takes place in the hypnotic state. It is well known that the hypnotised subject responds passively to all kinds of suggestions from the hypnotiser. Within certain limits it is only necessary to suggest the idea of an action or group of actions to bring about performance. "Tell the patient that he cannot open his eyes or his mouth, cannot unclasp his hands . . . and he will immediately be smitten with absolute impotence in these regards."² Tell him that he is a pig or a

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

² *Op. cit.*, vol. ii., p. 603.

lion or a baby or Julius Caesar, and he will proceed to enact the part. "Subjects in this condition will receive and execute suggestions of crime, and act out a theft, forgery, arson, or murder."¹ Now though the suggestion of the mere idea tends to have this effect more or less, yet the result can be produced with far more certainty and conspicuousness when the operator imposes on his patient a *belief* that he is such and such a person, or that he is going to do such and such a thing. Hence suggestions mainly take the form of assertions, such as, You will do this, You will not do that. When the patient has once adopted the belief that he is going to act in a certain manner, the ideas of alternative courses are suppressed, and the action follows.

It seems probable that the predominance which voluntary decision gives to the idea of a line of action is essentially connected with the belief that this is the line which we are going to follow out, to the exclusion of other alternatives.

§ 9. Involuntary Action. Fixed Ideas.—In the strictest sense an involuntary action is one which takes place in opposition to a voluntary decision. Thus if I am determined to make a certain stroke at billiards, and if in the moment of action the muscular apparatus fails me, so as to give rise to an unintended jerky movement, my action is strictly involuntary. But cases like this do not interest us here. What we are concerned with is the defeat of the will, not by an accidental circumstance interfering with its execution, but by an antagonistic impulse. We have an example of this in the unsuccessful effort to restrain a reflex movement over which we have normally sufficient control. Suppose a party of soldiers to be climbing a crag

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 605.

in the dark so as to surprise a castle. Noiselessness is a condition of success. A sneeze or a cough probably means defeat and loss of life. Now it is possible to a large extent to restrain the actions of sneezing and coughing; but if the irritation of the mucous membrane is sufficiently intense and persistent, temporary repression only makes the ultimate outburst more violent. One of the soldiers may be determined not to sneeze, although the impulse is so strong as to give him great uneasiness. The tendency to sneeze is a conation; to restrain it is painful, and to indulge it would be a relief. None the less, if the impulse prove irresistible the sneeze is involuntary.

In this instance the involuntary act follows on organic sensation and not on an idea. It does not take place because the ideal representation of the act of sneezing has become predominant, but merely because of the intense irritation of the mucous membrane.

There is, however, a wide class of instances in which the will is defeated by the obtrusive intensity of an ideal representation. In spite of the mental assertion that we are not going to perform a certain action, the idea of that action, owing to other conditions, acquires and maintains a dominance in consciousness which ultimately leads to its realisation.

This may happen even when the ideally represented object is not desired, and even when the only feeling towards it is that of intense aversion. A man standing on an eminence, such as the top of a cathedral tower, and looking down into the vast depth beneath him, thinks of what it would be like to throw himself down. Owing to the fascinating interest of the thought the idea of the action and its consequences obtrudes itself upon him with intense vividness, and he feels himself impelled to carry it into execution. He may have a very distinct and clear

volition to the contrary; he may utterly refuse to identify the idea of the action with the idea of Self. He mentally asserts, I shall not, or, I will not; and as a rule this voluntary decision triumphs over the "fixed idea" as it is called. But it still remains true that the fixed idea derives its vivacity from conditions independent of the will; and it is always possible that the impulse to realise it may acquire sufficient strength to overcome a contrary volition. Some people actually do throw themselves down precipices in this way.

This result however is not common under normal conditions. It is in pathological cases that the fixed idea becomes really formidable. This is partly due to imperfect powers of deliberation. The conative tendencies which would have restrained the act lie in abeyance; the concept of the Ego in its unity and totality can only be very inadequately developed in relation to the act contemplated. But there are instances in which this explanation does not apply. In such instances it is not the absence of inhibiting tendencies, but the positive strength of the impulsive idea which leads to action. Ribot gives a case of a man who was possessed by the idea of killing his mother. "'To you,' said he, 'I owe everything; I love you with all my soul; yet for some time past an incessant idea drives me to kill you.'" Tormented by this temptation, he leaves his home, and becomes a soldier. "Still a secret impulse stimulated him without cessation to desert in order to come home and kill his mother." In time, the thought of killing his mother gives place to that of killing his sister-in-law. Someone tells him that his sister-in-law is dead, and he accordingly returns home. "But as he arrives he sees his sister-in-law living. He gives a cry, and the terrible impulse seizes him again as a prey. That very evening he makes his brother tie him fast. 'Take a solid

rope, bind me like a wolf in the barn, and go and tell Dr. Calmeil . . .' From him he got admission to an insane asylum. The evening before his entrance he wrote to the director of the establishment: 'Sir, I am to become an inmate of your house. I shall behave there as if I were in the regiment. You will think me cured. At moments perhaps I shall pretend to be so. Never believe me. Never let me out on any pretext; the only use I shall make of my liberty will be to commit a crime which I abhor.'"¹

This is a case in which the fixed idea was not executed; but it easily might have taken effect, and many similar cases could be adduced in which it actually did so. What it is important to note is the conflict between the Self as a whole arranged on the side of the volition, and the isolated impulse to action which derives its strength merely from the fixation of an idea by pathological conditions. In these cases the conation which resists the will arises primarily from the fixation of the idea in consciousness. The fixation of the idea itself does not arise from any desire for its object. But under normal as opposed to pathological conditions, the commonest cases of involuntary action are those in which an idea becomes fixed through intense appetite or craving arising from organic conditions. To take an example given by Mr. Shand, a man may have a morbid craving for drink or opium, and the ideas which move to its satisfaction may at last become irresistible. Now here there are four possible alternatives.

In the first place, indulgence in the drink or opium may be contrary to the man's express volition at the moment when he drinks. This is probably a very rare occurrence. As a rule, when the impulse is strong enough

¹ Ribot, *Maladies de la Volonté*, p. 77, quoted by James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., p. 542.

to produce action, it is also strong enough to prevent or displace an opposing volition.

In the second place, there may have been a preformed resolution to refrain from the action; but at the moment at which it takes place the contrary impulse acquires such intensity as to pre-occupy the field of consciousness, so that the volition is temporarily in abeyance. Here action at the moment is non-voluntary rather than involuntary; but taking a broader view we may call it involuntary, because it runs counter to a volition which has only lapsed for the time being, and recurs in consciousness immediately after the act is over, in the form of remorse.

In the third place, the action may take effect before a voluntary decision has been arrived at. In the midst of the conflict of motives, the idea corresponding to the animal appetite may become so vivified as to pass into action while the process of deliberation is still working itself out. We may act before we know our own minds. A man, while still mentally hesitating whether he is to drink a glass of spirits or not, will find that the organic craving has so vivified the idea of drinking that he is swallowing the spirits before he has determined whether to do so or not. The action is then involuntary, because it interrupts the process of forming a volition. It may also be involuntary in a deeper sense; it may be that from the constitution of the man's whole nature, he would certainly have willed otherwise if full deliberation had been possible before acting.

In the fourth place, the organic craving may be the motive of a genuine volition, and the action may therefore be voluntary at the time at which it takes place. None the less, there is a sense in which the action may be regarded as involuntary. A comparison may be made between the totality of interests defeated by indulging in

the drink or opium, and the animal craving itself considered as a relatively isolated impulse. If the craving were taken away the Self would still be left. If on the other hand all the interests which are opposed to the indulgence were taken away, there would be little left but the morbid appetite itself. Thus the denial that the act is voluntary may have a good meaning. It may mean that the volition of the moment is discordant with the general volition of a lifetime, so that the intervals between the periods of indulgence are embittered by remorse. It is supposed that the morbid craving by its isolated intensity prevents full deliberation. There is, it is assumed, in the man's nature a vast system of conative tendencies which, if they had found fair play, and developed themselves in consciousness, would have determined volition even if they did not determine action. Of course, when we regard the question in this way, the voluntariness or involuntariness of an action is a matter of degree. We tend to think of the opium-eating of a man like Coleridge as a kind of external misfortune, because it is alien from the ideal aspirations which we regard as constituting his true Self. To this extent, we do not hold Coleridge responsible so much as the unfortunate craving which possessed and mastered him. In the case of a man of meaner nature, our judgment would be very different.

§ 10. Self-Control.—All the cases of involuntary action which we have discussed in the last section are cases of deficiency of self-control. Self-control is control proceeding from the Self as a whole and determining the Self as a whole. The degree in which it exists depends upon the degree in which this or that special tendency can be brought into relation with the concept of the Self and the system of conative tendencies which it includes. Failure in self-control may arise from one or both of two conditions. On

the one hand, the overpowering intensity of a relatively isolated impulse may prevent the due evolution of the concept of Self even when this is fully formed and organised. On the other hand, the defect may lie in the degree of development which self-consciousness has attained, or in organic conditions, mostly of a pathological kind, which disorganise the Self, and prevent the full development of its normal contents. To quote Dr. Clouston: "The driver may be so weak that he cannot control well-broken horses, or the horses may be so hard-mouthed that no driver can pull them up. Both conditions may arise from purely cerebral disorder. . . . An imbecile or dement, seeing something glittering, appropriates it to himself. . . . The motives that would lead other persons not to do such acts do not operate in such persons. I have known a man steal who said he had no intense longing for the article he appropriated at all, at least consciously, but his will was in abeyance, and he could not resist the ordinary desire of possession common to all human nature."¹ On this Professor James remarks: "It is not only those technically classed imbeciles and dement who exhibit this promptitude of impulse and tardiness of inhibition. Ask half the common drunkards you know why it is that they fall so often a prey to temptation, and they will say that most of the time they cannot tell. It is a sort of vertigo with them. Their nervous centres have become a sluice-way pathologically unlocked by every passing conception of a bottle and a glass. They do not thirst for the beverage; the taste of it may even appear repugnant; and they perfectly foresee the morrow's remorse. But when they think of the liquor or see it, they find themselves preparing to

¹ *Clinical Lectures on Mental Diseases*, quoted by James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., pp. 540-541.

drink, and do not stop themselves; and more than this they cannot say."¹ We have a good example of the inverse case in which the concept of Self is fully organised and easily developed, but finds itself impotent in the face of an abnormally intense impulse, in the case of the man who was possessed by the fixed idea of murdering his mother.

The process of ideal construction through which the concept of Self grows, is gradual, and reaches different degrees of perfection in different persons. The more highly systematised and organised it becomes, the more effective it is. Self-control is greatest in the man whose life is dominated by ideals and general principles of conduct; but this involves a development of conceptual consciousness which is absent in children and savages. We accordingly find that children and savages are to a great extent creatures of impulse; they have comparatively little power of deliberation, so that action tends to follow the conative tendency which is excited and supported by the circumstances of the moment. Remoter considerations are comparatively inoperative. The Self which determines action is predominantly the present Self, not the total Self as ideally represented. Thus the savage wastefully exhausts his present store in riotous indulgence, and is improvident of the future. He cannot be brought to work in a regular and persistent manner. He may be industrious enough for a time in order to gain a little money, or some other object which he happens to covet at the moment; but so soon as his immediate end is attained, he thinks no longer of working, but only of enjoying his gains. He is scarcely capable of pursuing a distant aim, which requires persistent and repeated activity continued for a long time without obvious result. Ends which are at least in part

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 541.

immediately attainable seem to be the only ends which effectively determine his action. For this reason he does not appreciate the value of time. The end he is pursuing at the moment has for him an absolute rather than a relative importance. He does not regard it merely as part of the great business of life which must be subordinated to the whole. He does not feel the necessity of completing the transaction in which he is interested in time to proceed to other matters. Hence he often sorely tries the patience of the civilised European by spending altogether disproportionate time and energy on relatively trivial bargains, etc. Such mottoes as "time is money" do not appeal to the savage mind. The same holds of young children, as we all know. The bird in the hand is to them worth a thousand in the bush.

§ 11. Voluntary Attention.—A voluntary determination may be either a determination to perform certain bodily movements or a determination to attend to certain objects. Attention, so far as it follows upon an express volition to attend, is called *voluntary attention*. All attention which is not so initiated is *non-voluntary* or spontaneous. When we attend not merely without an express volition to attend, but in opposition to such a volition, attention is in the strictest sense *involuntary*, and not merely non-voluntary. A good illustration of voluntary attention is to be found in "certain psychological experiments, in which the experimenter fixes his attention on an uninteresting object, in order to observe phenomena attending the process of fixation. He determines to attend to the object for the sake of observing what takes place when he attends to it. The spontaneous and the voluntary direction of attention are not merely distinct: they are also antagonistic. Everyone desires to avoid futile worry and fret; but no one has a mind so well regulated as to be able to divert his thoughts

at will from irremediable misfortune, and unavoidable sources of anxiety. When, owing to overwork, our minds are besieged at night by a subject which has occupied us during the day, we vainly endeavour to compose ourselves to rest. "We *will* to expel the intrusive thoughts; but we cannot keep up the effort persistently; and so soon as it is relaxed, the spontaneous movement of attention recurs, and murders sleep."¹ "All mental training and discipline depend on the victory" of voluntary attention. "This usually takes time. The resolution to devote attention to an unattractive subject can only succeed after repeated effort followed by repeated failure. The mind wanders at first, and requires to be again and again recalled to its task. We form a design to occupy ourselves with a certain topic. So soon as this design is being carried out, we cease to think of it and of the motives which prompted it. We think instead of the subject-matter which we had resolved to study. But this subject-matter is, *ex hypothesi*, uninteresting. It cannot, therefore, command attention. Accordingly our thoughts wander from the point, and have to be recalled by a renewed effort of will. This fitful alternation of attentiveness and inattentiveness may continue until fatigue and tedium cause the task to be abandoned. On the other hand, interest may grow up as the subject of study becomes better known. When this happens, the periods of concentration become gradually prolonged, until the necessity for deliberate effort ceases to exist. Thus the function of voluntary attention in such cases is to create spontaneous attention. When it fails in this, it produces only exhaustion and disgust. A person condemned to spend his whole life in constantly reiterated efforts to fix his mind on a hopelessly uninteresting topic,

¹ Author's *Analytic Psychology*, vol. i., p. 241.

would go mad, commit suicide, or sink into a state of coma. Voluntary attention belongs coincidentally to the province of intellect and to that of practical volition. It is the '*conduct* of the understanding,' and, like external conduct, is subject to moral law. In intellectual morality the fundamental virtue is patience."¹

The voluntary determination to attend plays a large and important part in the more complex forms of deliberation. We may compare the value of conflicting motives in relation to the total system of our lives; and we may find that considered from this point of view a certain motive or group of motives has not the strength and prominence which it ought to have. We may then attempt to give it this strength and prominence by voluntarily turning our attention in a certain direction. Thus a candidate preparing for an examination may find in himself a strong disposition to laziness, tempting him to spend a day in idleness. He may at the outset very faintly realise the special considerations which make such a course inadvisable: but he may at the same time know that these considerations are important, and that if he neglects them he will bitterly regret doing so. This at the outset may not constitute a motive sufficient to lead to a definite decision to apply himself to work instead of play; but it may be sufficient to give rise to the voluntary decision to fix attention on the reasons for working, and so to give to these reasons the strength and liveliness which they initially lack. In this indirect way he may reach a distinct and effective decision to go to work with steadiness and energy. It is in such cases as these that the consciousness of freedom is most conspicuous. For in such cases we not only will our act, but in a manner we will our volition. The voluntary

¹ Author's *Analytic Psychology*, vol. i., p. 242.

determination to act issues out of the voluntary determination to attend; and the voluntary determination to attend directly and obviously depends on the controlling influence of the concept of the Self as a whole.

§ 12. True Freedom.—It must not be supposed that anything we have said in this Chapter implies a denial of the freedom of the will in the sense in which such freedom is claimed by the ordinary consciousness of humanity. We have only thrown doubt on a certain theory of the nature of such freedom—the theory which goes by the name of *libertarianism*, or of *contingent choice*. By *contingent choice* is meant a choice which does not issue out of the total process of mental life in accordance with psychological laws, but springs into being of itself as if it were fired out of a pistol. This theory makes free decision arise by a kind of spontaneous generation. Those who oppose libertarianism sometimes call themselves Determinists. Some determinists agree with the libertarians in identifying freedom with contingent choice; they only disagree in denying the existence of such choice. As against both these, we maintain that freedom consists in self-determination, and that self-determination means self-control. Self-control, as we have defined it in § 10, consists in “control proceeding from the Self as a whole and determining the Self as a whole. The degree in which it exists depends upon the degree in which this or that special tendency can be brought into relation with the concept of the Self and the system of conative tendencies which it includes.”¹ Another way of putting this is to say that acts are free in so far as they flow from the character of the agent; for character is just the constitution of the Self as a whole. Character exists only in so far as unity and continuity of

¹ Page 626.

conscious life exists and manifests itself in systematic consistency of conduct. Animals can scarcely be said to have a character, because their actions flow from disconnected impulse. “If an animal could be supposed to think and speak, it could not refer its actions to itself, but only to its impulse at this or that moment.”¹ Character is little developed in savages as compared with civilised men; for they have relatively little power of considering particular actions in relation to an organised system of conduct. Now the development of character and the development of freedom are two aspects of the same process. A man’s acts “are his own only when he is *himself* in doing them,”²—when they express his total character rather than his momentary impulse.

It follows from this account that freedom is an ideal which can never be completely realised, and this ideal coincides with that of self-realisation, as expounded in Professor J. S. Mackenzie’s *Manual of Ethics*.³ But the last word about freedom lies neither with Psychology nor with Ethics. Its full discussion involves an examination of the relation between the thought and will of the individual mind, and the reality of the universe. This relation from the point of view of any finite science such as Psychology is utterly inexplicable. The more closely and conscientiously we endeavour to explain it by the ordinary categories of any special science, the more plain it becomes that so regarded it is a miracle,—indeed the miracle of miracles. Psychology cannot explain how it is possible that an individual can consciously mean or intend something. To say that he has a present modification of consciousness which resembles an object is very far from

¹ J. S. Mackenzie, *Manual of Ethics*, fifth edition, p. 97.

² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³ See especially bk. ii, ch. v., § 12, “The True Self.”

being the same thing as saying that he has a thought of this object,—that he means or intends it. I may now have a toothache, and you may have a toothache exactly like it, but my toothache is not the thought of your toothache. Will and thought are not explicable by such categories as causality, substance, resemblance, or correspondence. Hence, truth and freedom are ultimately topics for the metaphysician. As psychologists, we deal not with the ultimate possibility of will and thought, but only with their mode of occurrence as time-processes taking place in the individual mind.

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