

The Self-Image

The dynamics of personal action

Each one of us speaks, moves, thinks, and feels in a different way, each according to the image of himself that he has built up over the years. In order to change our mode of action we must change the image of ourselves that we carry within us. What is involved here, of course, is a change in the dynamics of our reactions, and not the mere replacing of one action by another. Such a change involves not only a change in our self-image, but a change in the nature of our motivations, and the mobilization of all the parts of the body concerned.

These changes produce the noticeable difference in the way each individual carries out similar actions—handwriting and pronunciation, for instance.

The four components of action

Our self-image consists of four components that are involved in every action: movement, sensation, feeling, and thought. The contribution of each of the components to any particular action varies, just as the

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persons carrying out the action vary, but each component will be present to some extent in any action.

In order to think, for instance, a person must be awake, and know that he is awake and not dreaming; that is, he must sense and discern his physical position relative to the field of gravity. It follows that movement, sensing, and feeling are also involved in thinking.

In order to feel angry or happy, a man must be in a certain posture, and in some kind of relationship to another being or object. That is, he must also move, sense, and think.

In order to sense—see, hear, or touch—a person must be interested, startled, or aware of some happening that involves him. That is, he must move, feel, and think.

In order to move, he must use at least one of his senses, consciously or unconsciously, which involves feeling and thinking.

When one of these elements of action becomes so minute as almost to disappear, existence itself may be endangered. It is difficult to survive for even brief periods without any movement at all. There is no life where a being is deprived of all senses. Without feeling, there is no drive to live; it is the feeling of suffocation that forces us to breathe. Without at least some minimum of reflex thought, even a beetle cannot live too long.

Changes become fixed as habits

In reality our self-image is never static. It changes from action to action, but these changes gradually become habits; that is, the actions take on a fixed, unchanging character.

Early in life, when the image is being established, the rate of change in the image is high; new forms of action that had only the previous day been beyond the child's capacity are quickly achieved. The infant begins to see, for instance, a few weeks after birth; one day he will begin to stand, walk, and talk. The child's own experiences, together with his biological inheritance, combine slowly to create an individual way of

standing, walking, speaking, feeling, listening, and of carrying out all the other actions that give substance to human life. But while from a distance the life of one person appears to be very similar to that of any other, on close inspection they are entirely different. We must, then, use words and concepts in such a way that they will apply more or less equally to everyone.

How the self-image is formed

We confine ourselves therefore to examining in detail the motor part of the self-image. Instinct, feeling, and thought being linked with movement, their role in the creation of the self-image reveals itself together with that of movement.

The stimulation of certain cells in the motor cortex of the brain will activate a particular muscle. It is known today that the correspondence between the cells of the cortex and the muscles that they activate is neither absolute nor exclusive. Nevertheless, we may consider that there is sufficient experimental justification to assume that specific cells do activate specific muscles at least in basic, elementary movements.

Individual and social action

The newborn human can perform practically nothing of what he will carry out as an adult in human society, but he can do almost everything the adult can do as an individual. He can breathe, eat, digest, eliminate, and his body can organize all the biological and physiological processes except the sexual act—and this may be considered a social process in the adult, for it takes place between two persons. In the beginning, sexual activity remains confined to the individual sphere. It is now widely accepted that adult sexuality develops from early self-sexuality. This approach makes it possible to explain inadequacies in this field as a failure in the development of the individual toward full social sexuality.

Contact with the external world

The infant's contact with the external world is established mainly through the lips and mouth; through these he recognizes his mother. He will use his hands to fumble and assist the work of his mouth and lips, and will know by touch what he already knows through his lips and mouth. From here he will gradually progress to the discovery of other parts of his body and their relationship to each other, and through them his first notions of distance and volume. The discovery of time begins with the coordinating of processes of breathing and swallowing, both of which are connected with movements of the lips, mouth, jaw, nostrils, and the surrounding area.

The self-image on the motor cortex

Were we to mark in color on the surface area of the motor cortex of the brain of a month-old infant the cells that activate muscles subject to his developing will, we should obtain a form resembling that of his body, but it would represent only the areas of voluntary action, not the anatomical configuration of the parts of his body. We should see, for instance, that the lips and mouth occupy most of the colored area. The antigravity muscles—those that open the joints and so erect the body—are not yet subject to voluntary control; the muscles of the hands, too, are only just beginning to respond occasionally to will. We should obtain a functional image in which the human body is indicated by four thin strokes of the pen for the limbs, joined together by another short and thin line for the trunk, with lips and mouth occupying most of the picture.

Every new function changes the image

Were we to color the cells activating muscles subject to voluntary control of a child that has already learned to walk and write, we should

obtain quite a different functional image. The lips and mouth would again occupy most of the space because the function of speech, which involves the tongue, mouth, and lips, has been added to the previous picture. However another large patch of color would have become conspicuous, covering the area of cells that activate the thumbs. The area of cells activating the right thumb will be noticeably larger than that activating the left one. The thumb takes part in almost every movement made by the hand, in writing particularly. The area representing the thumb will be larger than that representing the other fingers.

The muscle-image in the motor cortex is unique for every individual

If we continued to draw such outlines every few years, not only would the result be different each time, but it would vary distinctively from one individual to another. In a man who has not learned to write, the patches of color representing the thumbs would remain small, because cells that might have been included would remain unused. The area for the third finger would be larger in a person who has learned to play a musical instrument than in one who has not. People who know several languages, or who sing, would show larger areas covering cells that activate the muscles for the control of breathing, tongue, mouth, and so on.

Only the muscle-image is based on observation

In the course of much experimenting, physiologists have discovered that in basic movements at least, the cells concerned link up on the motor cortex of the brain into a shape resembling the body, which they refer to as the *homunculus*. There is thus a valid basis for the concept of the "self-image," at least in so far as basic movements are concerned. We have no similar experimental evidence with regard to sensation, feeling, or thought.

Our self-image is smaller than our potential capacity

Our self-image is essentially smaller than it might be, for it is built up only of the group of cells that we have actually used. Further, the various patterns and combinations of cells are perhaps more important than their actual number. A man who has mastered several languages will make use both of more cells and more combinations of cells. Most children of minority population communities the world over know at least two languages; their self-image is a little nearer the potential maximum than that of people who know only their mother tongue.

It is the same in most other areas of activity. Our self-image is in general more limited and smaller than our potential. There are individuals who know from thirty to seventy languages. This indicates that the average self-image occupies only about 5 percent of its potential. Systematic observation and treatment of some thousands of individuals drawn from most nations and civilizations have convinced me that this figure is roughly the fraction we use of our total hidden potential.

The achievement of immediate objectives has a negative aspect

The negative aspect of learning to achieve aims is that we tend to stop learning when we have mastered sufficient skills to attain our immediate objective. Thus, for instance, we improve our speech until we can make ourselves understood. But any person who wishes to speak with the clarity of an actor discovers that he must study speech for several years in order to achieve anything approaching his maximum potential in this direction. An intricate process of limiting ability accustoms man to make do with 5 percent of his potential without realizing that his development has been stunted. The complexity of the situation is brought about by the inherent interdependence between the growth and development of

the individual and the culture and economy of the society in which he grows.

Education is largely tied to prevailing circumstances

Nobody knows the purpose of life, and the education that each generation passes on to the succeeding one is no more than a continuation of the habits of thought of the prevailing generation. Life has been a harsh struggle since the beginning of mankind; nature is not kind to creatures lacking awareness. One cannot ignore the great social difficulties created by the existence of the many millions of people the earth has harbored in the past few centuries. Under such conditions of strain, education is improved only to the extent that is necessary and possible in order to bring up a new generation able to replace the old one under more or less similar conditions.

Minimum development of the individual satisfies the needs of society

The basic biological tendency of any organism to grow and develop to its fullest extent has been largely governed by social and economic revolutions that improved living conditions for the majority and enabled greater numbers to reach a minimum of development. Under these conditions basic potential development ceased in early adolescence because the demands of society enabled the members of the young generation to be accepted as useful individuals at the minimum stage. Further training after early adolescence is, in fact, confined to the acquisition of practical and professional knowledge in some field, and basic development is continued only by chance and in exceptional cases. Only the unusual person will continue to improve his self-image until it more nearly approaches the potential ability inherent in each individual.

The vicious circle of incomplete development and satisfaction with achievement

In the light of the statements above, it becomes clear that most people do not achieve the use of more than a minute fraction of their potential ability; the minority that outstrips the majority does so not because of its higher potential, but because it learns to use a higher proportion of this potential, that may well be no more than average—taking into account of course that no two people share an identical natural ability.

How is such a vicious circle created, which at one and the same time stunts men's powers, yet permits them to feel reasonably self-satisfied for all that they have limited themselves to, a small proportion of their capacities? It is a curious situation.

The physiological processes that hamper development

In the first years of his life, man is similar to every other living being, mobilizing all his separate powers and using every function that is sufficiently developed. The cells of his body seek, like all living cells, to grow and to perform their specific functions. This applies equally to the cells of the nervous system; each one lives its own life as a cell while participating in the organic function for which it exists. Nevertheless many cells remain inactive as part of the total organism. This may be because of two different processes. In one, the organism may be occupied with actions that require the inhibition of certain cells and the necessary mobilization of others. If the body is occupied more or less continuously with such actions, then a number of cells will be in an almost constant state of inhibition.

In the other case, some potential functions may not reach maturity at all. The organism may have no call to practice them, either because it sets no value on them as such, or because its drives lead it in a different

direction. Both these processes are common. And, indeed, social conditions allow an organism to function as a useful member of society without in the least developing its capacities to the full.

Man judges himself in accordance with his value to society

The general tendency toward social improvement in our day has led directly to a disregard, rising to neglect, for the human material of which society is built. The fault lies not in the goal itself—which is constructive in the main—but in the fact that individuals, rightly or wrongly, tend to identify their self-images with their value to society. Even if he has emancipated himself from his educators and protectors, man does not strive to make himself any different from the pattern impressed upon him from the outset. In this way society comes to be made up of persons increasingly alike in their ways, behavior, and aims. Despite the fact that the inherited differences between people are obvious, there are few individuals who view themselves without reference to the value attributed to them by society. Like a man trying to force a square peg into a round hole, so the individual tries to smooth out his biological peculiarities by alienating himself from his inherent needs. He strains to fit himself into the round hole that he now actively desires to fill, for if he fails in this, his value will be so diminished in his own eyes as to discourage further initiative. These considerations must be borne in mind to appreciate fully the overwhelming influence of the individual's attitude toward himself once he again seeks to foster his own growth, that is, to allow his specific qualities to develop and reach fruition.

Judging a child by his achievements robs him of spontaneity

During his early years a child is valued, by and large, not for his achievements, but simply for himself. In families where this is the case, the child will develop in accordance with his individual abilities. In families where children are judged primarily by their achievements, all

spontaneity will disappear at an early age. These children will become adults without experiencing adolescence. Such adults may from time to time feel an unconscious longing for the adolescence they have missed, a desire to seek out those instinctive capacities within themselves that were denied their youthful will to develop.

Self-improvement is linked to recognition of the value of the self

It is important to understand that if a man wishes to improve his self-image, he must first of all learn to value himself as an individual, even if his faults as a member of society appear to him to outweigh his qualities.

We may learn from persons crippled from birth or childhood how an individual may view himself in the face of obvious shortcomings. Those who succeed in looking at themselves with a sufficient, encompassing humanity to achieve stable self-respect may reach heights that the normally healthy will never achieve. But those who consider themselves inferior because of their disabilities, and overcome them by sheer will power, tend to grow into hard and embittered adults who will take revenge upon fellow men who are not at fault and, moreover, who may not be able to change the circumstances even if they wished to do so.

Action becomes the main arm in furthering self-improvement

Recognizing one's value is important at the start of self-improvement, but for any real improvement to be achieved, regard for the self will have to be relegated to second place. Unless a stage is reached at which self-regard ceases to be the main motivating force, any improvement achieved will never be sufficient to satisfy the individual. In fact, as a man grows and improves, his entire existence centers increasingly on *what* he does and how, while *who* does it becomes of ever decreasing importance.

The difficulty of changing an earlier pattern of action

A man tends to regard his self-image as something bestowed upon him by nature, although it is, in fact, the result of his own experience. His appearance, voice, way of thinking, environment, his relationship to space and time—to choose at random—are all taken for granted as realities born with him, whereas every important element in the individual's relationship to other people and to society in general is the result of extensive training. The arts of walking, speaking, reading, and of recognizing three dimensions in a photograph are skills the individual accumulates over a period of many years; each of them depends on chance, and on the place and period of his birth. The acquisition of a second language is not as easy as that of the first, and the pronunciation of the newly learned language will be marked by the influence of the first; the sentence structure of the first language will impose itself on the second. Every pattern of action that has become fully assimilated will interfere with the patterns of subsequent actions.

Difficulties arise, for instance, when a person learns to sit according to the custom of some nation other than his own. As these early patterns of sitting are not the result of heredity alone, but derive from the chance and circumstances of birth, the difficulties involved lie less in the nature of the new habit than in the changing of habits of body, feeling, and mind from their established patterns. This holds true for almost any change of habit, whatever its origin. What is meant here, of course, is not the simple substitution of one activity by another, but a change in the way an act is performed, a change in its whole dynamics, so that the new method will be in every respect as good as the old.

There is no awareness of many parts of the body

A person who lies down on his back and tries to sense his entire body systematically—that is, turning his attention to every limb and

part of the body in turn—finds that certain sections respond easily, while others remain mute or dull and beyond the range of his awareness.

It is thus easy to sense the fingertips or lips, but much harder to sense the back of the head at the nape, between the ears. Naturally, the degree of difficulty is individual, depending on the form of the self-image. Generally speaking, it will be difficult to find a person whose whole body is equally accessible to his awareness. The parts of the body that are easily defined in the awareness are those that serve man daily, while the parts that are dull or mute in his awareness play only an indirect role in his life and are almost missing from his self-image when he is in action.

A person who cannot sing at all cannot feel this function in his self-image except by an effort of intellectual extrapolation. He is not aware of any vital connection between the hollow space in his mouth and his ears or his breathing, as does the singer. A man who cannot jump will not be aware of those parts of the body involved that are clearly defined to a man who is able to jump.

A complete self-image is a rare and ideal state

A complete self-image would involve full awareness of all the joints in the skeletal structure as well as of the entire surface of the body—at the back, the sides, between the legs, and so on; this is an ideal condition and hence a rare one. We can all demonstrate to ourselves that everything we do is in accordance with the limits of our self-image and that this image is no more than a narrow sector of the ideal image. It is also easily observed that the relationship between different parts of the self-image changes from activity to activity and from position to position. This is not so easily seen under common conditions, owing to their very familiarity, but it is sufficient to imagine the body poised for an unfamiliar movement in order to realize that the legs, for instance, will appear to change in length, thickness, and other aspects from movement to movement.

Estimation of size varies in different limbs

If we try, for instance, to indicate the length of our mouth, with eyes closed, by means of the thumb and first finger of the right hand, and with both hands using the first finger of each, we shall obtain two different values. Not only will neither measurement correspond to the actual length of the mouth, but both may be several times too large or too small. Again, if we try, with eyes closed, to estimate the thickness of our chest by placing our hands this distance apart, horizontally and vertically, we are likely to get two quite different values, neither of which need be anywhere near the truth.

Close your eyes and stretch out your arms in front of you, about the width of the shoulders apart, and then imagine the point at which the ray of light traveling from the index finger of the right hand to the left eye will cross the ray of light traveling from the index finger of the left hand to the right eye. Now try to mark this crossing point using the thumb and index finger of the right hand; it is unlikely that the place chosen will seem correct when you open your eyes to look.

There are few people whose self-image is sufficiently complete for them to be able to identify the correct spot in this way. What is more, if the experiment is repeated using the thumb and index finger of the left hand, a different location will most likely be chosen for the same point.

The average approximation is far from the best that can be achieved

It is easy to show by means of unfamiliar movements that our self-image is in general far from the degree of completeness and accuracy that we ascribe to it. Our image is formed through familiar actions in which approximation to reality is improved by bringing into play several of the senses that tend to correct each other. Thus, our image is more accurate in the region in front of our eyes than behind us or above our

heads, and in familiar positions such as sitting or standing.

If the difference between imagined values or positions—one estimated with eyes closed and one with eyes open—is not more than 20 or 30 percent, accuracy may be considered average, though not satisfactory.

Individuals act in accordance with their subjective image

The difference between image and reality may be as much as 300 percent and even more. Persons who normally hold their chests in a position as though air had been expelled by the lungs in an exaggerated fashion, with their chest both flatter than it should be and too flat to serve them efficiently, are likely to indicate its depth as several times larger than it is if asked to do so with their eyes closed. That is, the excessive flatness appears right to them, because any thickening of the chest appears to them a demonstrably exaggerated effort to expand their lungs. Normal expansion feels to them as a deliberately blown up chest would to another person.

The way a man holds his shoulders, head, and stomach; his voice and expression; his stability and manner of presenting himself—all are based on his self-image. But this image may be cut down or blown up to fit the mask by which its owner would like to be judged by his peers. Only the man himself can know which part of his outward appearance is fictitious and which is genuine. However, not everybody is capable of identifying himself easily, and one may be greatly helped by the experience of others.

Systematic correction of the image is more useful than correction of single actions

From what has been said about the self-image, it emerges that systematic correction of the image will be a quicker and more efficient approach than the correction of single actions and errors in modes of behavior, the incidence of which increases as we come to deal with smaller errors.

The establishment of an initial more or less complete, although approximate, image will make it possible to improve the general dynamics instead of dealing with individual actions piecemeal. This improvement may be likened to correcting playing on an instrument that is not properly tuned. Improving the general dynamics of the image becomes the equivalent of tuning the piano itself, as it is much easier to play correctly on an instrument that is in tune than on one that is not.