

WHAT IS MAN'S SUPREME INHERITANCE?

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MAN'S SUPREME INHERITANCE: Conscious Guidance in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization. By F. Matthias Alexander, with an introductory word by Professor John Dewey. American Edition. Published by E. P. Dutton Company, New York, 1918.

MAN'S supreme inheritance is his body, consciously controlled in thought and action. No book could have a greater subject nor a better title. Every one is interested in his own development and that of the race. To this problem the author has made a distinct contribution, based upon first-hand information. His conclusions are couched in popular language, and the result is a very readable book. The first edition, issued three months ago, is already exhausted.

Civilization has made a normal body a problem. Our complex life has developed too rapidly not to make strange and sudden demands upon the human organism. Civilized people are unhealthy in comparison with wild animals and primitive races. Does our health demand that we return to a less civilized life, or can we adapt our bodies to the civilized environment which the race has developed? The author furnishes the evidence necessary to show that we can use our bodies, and our minds, therefore, to much greater advantage than the most of us do, and that the way lies in a further general progress of the race from instinctive guidance to conscious control. According to his observation, while some persons are able to adapt themselves to civilized life with a fair degree of success, the great majority fail in adjustment to their ever-changing environment, with results, which, in an alarming number of cases are progressively disastrous. The soundness of the vital organs does not of itself command maximum health and mental power. Diet, sleep, exercise, and sanitation count for much, but their variations by no means account for all of the differences in health to be met among those whose organs are all sound. Our organs are interdependent, and the working power of a complex unit, like the human body, depends upon the co-ordination of all of its parts. The control of the muscular mechanism governing carriage, or habitual posture in standing, walking, and sitting, is a determining factor in the co-ordination of the organs of breathing, circulation, and digestion, and of speech and eyesight as well. If this be so, we identify in posture a cause of subnormal health of far-reaching importance. If also a person whose posture is poor has not the power to command a correct carriage, how one holds himself is all the more significant. The stooping, round-shouldered man knows that he cannot straighten himself entirely when he tries. He cannot throw back his shoulders without hollowing his back. Nor can he maintain this position for more than a few minutes without fatigue. Whereas he observes that in the truly straight person the erect posture is the position of rest. Is there, then, an art of posture, an art which some persons have never been without and which others do not possess? And may not this art be taught? And may not adults learn it, although with more difficulty than children?

Mr. Alexander holds that posture is an accomplishment and that the conscious control of the position of "mechanical advantage" is an art of primary importance. The very large part which posture plays in the evolution of man appears in two phenomena of common knowledge. The first of these is that of the assumption by man of the erect position and is probably the most radical single change in habit in the history of mammals, and we cannot expect that every individual of the species will develop this position of equilibrium with equal skill, especially in our complex civilization of various occupations in the office, home, and shop, and in the general absence of a really intelligent training of babies in their first efforts to walk. The second phenomenon in point is that our so-called vital organs are all hung as though man was intended to go on all fours, a circumstance which argues that these organs cannot be expected to function at their best unless the erect position be maintained in the most favorable manner.

Every person co-ordinates himself somehow, for he must maintain his equilibrium. One maladjustment in consequence will be balanced by another. If the back be unduly bent in and the abdomen out false strains are put upon the feet. If the chest is thrown up an undue strain is put upon the heart and the lungs are cramped. The author contends that the military posture adopted in army training by all nations is abnormal and lowers the working power of the organs of breathing, circulation, digestion, and locomotion, and he intimates that the rule of exercise of the British Army results in the physical breakdown of many soldiers every year and their having to abandon the service. He condemns only less severely the prevalent systems of calisthenics and much of "free expression" dancing, as exercising the body

in faulty positions and cultivating some new attitudes still more serious. In the position of mechanical advantage, on the other hand, which he advocates, a man is in the best attitude either to welcome a friend with outstretched arms or to land a blow with the fist, or, on bending the knees and hips, to lift either a heavy or a light weight from the ground without having to know in advance what amount of pull the given weight will demand of him.

The position of one part of the body automatically makes another part rigid or relaxed as the case may be. This law is of prime importance both in diagnosis and in re-education. Suppleness of hands, wrists, shoulders, and neck, for instance, depends upon muscle control. The stiff-jointed person is limited in control, holding some muscles taut which should be relaxed, and some muscles relaxed which should be taut, if he is to execute a given motion with freedom; and he is unable to command these muscles properly. The result is inelastic carriage and movement.

And rigidity of body induces rigidity of mind. A "stiff-necked" people is a designation which occurs more than once in the writings of the ancient Hebrews, and points to an accurate observation in ancient times of the habitual posture of the most obstinate individuals. Does not the rigidity of the German mind of the present generation owe something to the military posture to which the whole male population has been trained? It is the attitude of arrogance and even of throaty speech. A brain highly trained in its way is capable of as amazing stupidities through rigidity as through ignorance. There are few who do not fail frequently to act on their best judgments in time. No one can know how rigid he was in mind or body until after he has been re-educated in physical co-ordination. If one fancies that he has only to be informed verbally how to lengthen and relax his body he will find that his control of his muscles is too limited for the purpose. He learns on being re-educated that what he conceived to be relaxation is collapse. He learns, too, how his debauched sensory appreciations fail him in registering muscular adjustment. Habit has limited his muscle control. But habit is the great stabilizer. It is the power to repeat an action automatically in the absence of a mental order to the contrary. A bad habit has to be overcome by a conscious control which inhabits it and at the same time cultivates a new habit by a repetition of another action until it in time becomes automatic. The first step in this re-education is the development of the brain tracks necessary for the mental orders required. This is promptly accomplished, however, under the voice and hands of an expert. How long it will take to re-educate a given individual depends upon the mental rigidity of the person in question.

The correct co-ordination of the muscular system results in accelerated lung action, better circulation, and the conditions present, which command these advantages, brings about also a constant and effective massage of the organs of digestion during sleeping and waking hours. Upon the much-debated subject of respiration Mr. Alexander speaks at some length. He claims that a correct co-ordination of the muscular system induces normal respiration, and also that a partial vacuum in the lungs gives atmospheric pressure its opportunity, and that this should prevent that harmful depression of the larynx and lowering of air pressure in the nostrils which are forerunners of throat and nose troubles. He has something to say, too, in regard to the evils of what is called "deep breathing."

A so-called cripple may lack only a proper control of certain muscles in order to become normal. Corpulence and flat-foot are involved in the question of carriage. A stammerer presents a case of local control.

Parents will be especially interested in the chapters on Race Culture and the Training of Children, Synopsis of Claim, and the Processes of Conscious Guidance and Control. The athlete may learn not a little from this book of how to handle himself in his sport. The golfer will appreciate its pages and what they record regarding the position of mechanical advantage and the light they shed by indirect illumination upon the vexed problems of why he goes off his game, and why he does not improve his play. The plowman should be no less interested in the position of mechanical advantage than the golfer. As a brain worker, however, a man stands to gain most of all.

The technique of Mr. Alexander's own art of re-education, which is the subject of the book, is incommunicable on paper, especially as every case for treatment is a special case. It is cheering to note, however, that while it requires an expert to correct the co-ordination of an adult, yet almost any one may be taught by an expert how to train children to hold themselves correctly. Moreover, a correct co-ordination once achieved by child or adult promises to be permanent.

The author has demonstrated his theory in a practice covering a period of over twenty years, first in Australia, and then in London and New York. Obviously, as Professor Dewey remarks in the foreword of the volume, here is a book of basic significance to physiology, psychology, education, and every sphere of contemporary life. In this significance of his work and its theory Mr. Alexander shows himself to be especially interested.